

## Chapter 1: Burdens of a troubled soul.

It was a cool Saturday morning and there was a mist drifting across the great lake. Sunlight was beginning to stream out over the castle bathing the grounds in warm, amber light. Underneath a large tree next to the lake sat a lone figure on the otherwise deserted grounds.

He was so lost in thought that he never noticed the young woman walking down from the castle heading straight for him. Without a word, the second figure sat down on the ground next to the young man and handed over a bacon sandwich wrapped in a napkin that she pulled out of her shoulder bag.

"Thanks, Hermione." Harry croaked, and he began to eat his sandwich. Harry and Hermione sat and watched the sunrise completely over the castle, comfortable in their shared silence.

In a voice so low, that Hermione had to strain to hear it over the sounds of the awakening forest Harry whispered, "I'm so scared, I don't think that I'm ready for this."

Hermione could hear the fear in his voice and that alone shook her. "Harry..." but he interrupted her before she could continue speaking.

"Crouch Sr. says that my name coming out of the Goblet of Fire is a magically binding contract, even though I didn't enter myself. They all thought that I had gone back to Gryffindor tower after they dismissed me, but I stayed in the hallway to hear what was going on. Snape suggested that they use me to draw out the person that put my name into the Goblet and Dumbledore agreed. They are using me for bait, Hermione. BAIT!" Harry hissed the last word with venom.

Harry stood up abruptly and walked over to the water's edge, stuffing his hands into his robe pockets in frustration. "They aren't even going to give me any help, and I know that Madam Maxine and Karkaroff are going to do everything that they can to help Fleur and Krum win the tournament."

Hermione got up and wrapped Harry in a hug from behind, he stiffened for a brief moment but did not move away, and she buried

her cheek against his shoulder. "You can do this Harry; I'll do everything I can to help you get through this." Then she felt it, Harry's breath caught in his chest and she knew that he was crying silently.

After a few moments, Harry gently tugged Hermione's hands apart and turned into the embrace so that they were facing each other. Pulling her into his chest, he returned the hug and whispered in her ear, "Thanks. I don't know what I would do without you."

"I'll always be there to help you Harry, you're my best friend." Hermione stated while pulling back to look at his face. "Besides, think of all of the new spells we are going to learn while preparing you for the tournament. We should write to Sirius and let him know what is going on. Do you think that he would give us some ideas to help with the tasks?"

"That's a good idea. Perhaps we can ask Professor Lupin to help too. He is the one that taught me the Patronus Charm last year and he was definitely our best Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher." Harry reached out and grabbed Hermione's hand. "Let's go visit Hedwig and send a couple of letters out."

Hermione was a bit surprised when Harry did not let go of her hand as they walked back up to the castle because it was rare that he initiated contact with anyone. It was as if he was not used to physical contact at all. Then it hit her like a well-placed Impediment Jinx and she stopped in her tracks. Because they were still holding hands, Harry came to a quick stop.

He turned to look at her and the expression that he saw on her face was murderous. Quickly growing concerned, he pulled out his wand and looked around at their surroundings. They were next to Greenhouse Seven but there was no one in sight. "What's wrong, Hermione? Are you okay?"

Hermione grabbed his hand and began dragging him towards the greenhouse. In her anger, the door to the greenhouse burst open before they got within five feet of it and she strode in without a second glance. Once Harry was inside, she turned and cast a locking

charm on the door before sitting down on one of the benches and pulling Harry with her.

After taking a calming breath Hermione slowly reached out, took Harry's hands in hers, looked into his eyes, and said, "Harry, why did you stiffen first when I hugged you? When was the last time that you had a hug?"

This was not what Harry was expecting when Hermione dragged him into the greenhouse in a towering rage. As such, in his confusion he answered with complete honesty, "I'm not used to being touched at all, Hermione. The last hug that I had before today was the one from you at the end of last year when we got off the train. My aunt never touches me unless it's to grab my arm for something that she thinks I did wrong." Immediately after completing his sentence, Harry realized what he had said, and his eyes went wide with fear before he hung his head down in shame.

"Harry, you didn't do anything wrong." Hermione said quietly. "That is called child abuse and your aunt and uncle are guilty, not you. Have you ever told anyone about this before?"

Harry still had not looked up but when he spoke, Hermione could hear the tears, pain, and bitterness in his voice. "Dumbledore knows. The address on my first letter from Hogwarts was to my cupboard under the stairs. That's why I have never brought it up before because I don't think that he will do anything to help me with the Dursleys." Then all of a sudden the floodgates opened and Harry began telling Hermione everything that had ever happened to him in his time at his relatives. He told her about starving, the mental and physical abuse, a lack of clothes that fit properly, being the Dursley's house-elf, and how he only got his own bedroom after coming to Hogwarts. When Harry was finished it was like a great weight lifted that he was not aware that he had been carrying around.

Hermione was crying openly while holding his hands and doing nothing to hide her tears. "Harry, I think that we should talk to my parents and maybe a solicitor too. I know you don't want to, but I think it would really help." Hermione pleaded.

"You're right, Hermione; I just don't like talking about it at all. No one has ever helped me with any of this before. I do not want to live with the Dursleys anymore but I don't want to go to the Weasleys or an orphanage either. What am I going to do?" Harry asked in a small voice.

"We," Hermione emphasized clearly, "are going to figure this out together. I will write to my parents about the situation with your relatives and see if they have some ideas that could help you out. However, the tournament is still going to be a priority right now."

After taking a few minutes to compose themselves, Hermione opened her bag and began to pull out quills and parchment so they could begin writing letters to Sirius, Remus, and her parents. Harry put everything he could remember about Dumbledore and Snape's conversation about the tournament and how only Hermione seemed to believe that he had not put his name in the Goblet of Fire. He finished his letter asking Sirius and Remus if they knew of a quicker way to communicate with each other because owl post took too long. Hermione had also completed her letter, sealed it, and handed it to Harry to mail.

When they reached the tower, Harry called down Hedwig and told her to wait with Hermione's parents for a reply. After watching his snowy owl disappear over the horizon Harry sighed and looked over at Hermione and said, "I guess we should head back to the tower so I can get my stuff and face the music."

"Okay. Do you want to go to the library afterwards or should we look for a place to practice spells?"

"I think that I would like to look around the castle to find a place to practice. My mind is still too cluttered to study right now."

As Hermione moved towards the door of the Owlry, Harry reached out a hand, tentatively touched her shoulder, and gently turned her to face him. "Thank you."

No more words were necessary; Hermione could see the depth of thanks in Harry's emerald eyes. "You're welcome."

He pulled the door open for her and they headed towards Gryffindor Tower, each of them thinking of the things that they needed to do to make sure that Harry survived the tournament.

Stepping through the portrait into the common room, Harry was unprepared for the sight that greeted him. Neville was red in the face, his fists clenched, as he stood over the crumpled form of Ron Weasley. “Don’t you ever say that about Harry again, Ron! You know he hates the attention. He said that he didn’t put his name in that stupid goblet and I believe him.”

“Thanks, Neville.” Harry said while stepping fully into the common room. Neither of them had noticed Harry and Hermione enter through the portrait. “That means a lot to me to know that you believe that I didn’t enter the tournament.”

“You’re welcome, Harry. Hello, Hermione.” Neville said as he turned to face them, with a sheepish grin on his face.

“Is there something that you want to say to me?” Harry asked Ron. Without saying a word, Ron got up and walked past them out of the portrait hole. “I take it that he is upset that my name came out of the Goblet and he still thinks that I entered the tournament on my own?”

Neville paused for a moment in thought and then answered, “Yeah, that about sums it up. He isn’t the only one that thinks that you entered on your own, but he is the only one in Gryffindor that is mad at you for being a champion.”

“What a load of rubbish! If he could get past his own jealousy maybe he would see that someone put Harry’s name in the Goblet of Fire for a reason.” Hermione fumed as she sat down in her favorite spot by the fire. “Don’t worry Harry, he will come around eventually, realize that he is wrong, and things will go back to the way that they were before.” Hermione hung her head as she said the last part.

Harry was watching Hermione from the corner of his eye and noticed that she had slumped down after she had finished speaking. He realized that he had not been a good friend to Hermione at all when it

came to the relationship between her and Ron. "Hey," Harry said softly as he reached over to touch Hermione's arm. "I'm sorry. I should have stood up to him before for how he treats you. Things will not be going back to the way that they were, ever. I told you that you are my best friend and it's about time I started acting that way."

"Oh, Harry!" Hermione sobbed as she threw herself into his arms.

Neville silently waved goodbye to Harry and headed up to their room to give them some privacy.

Chuckling a little, Harry said, "It's really been an emotional day hasn't it?" and then he broke out into a full laugh as Hermione started giggling into his chest. Once their laughter had died down, Harry said, "You know, I think I feel better about all of this now that you know everything that I have gone through. It doesn't seem like such a burden anymore."

"I'm glad that I could help and talking about things makes you put them into perspective and allows you to move on." Hermione stood up from the sofa and pulled Harry to his feet. "Now hurry up and get your stuff so we can find a place to practice."

Grinning, Harry walked up the steps to his dorm room and retrieved the Marauders Map and his invisibility cloak to aid them in their search.

## Chapter 2: Harry Defended.

Hermione's parents were just sitting down in their dining room for dinner when there was a tapping on the kitchen window. Sitting on the windowsill was the most beautiful owl that they had ever seen. Mrs. Granger opened the window and stepped back to allow the owl to hop onto the counter top.

Hedwig gazed up at the Grangers and stuck out her leg with the letter addressed to them. After taking the letter from the owl Mrs. Granger set out a bowl of water and some owl treats that Hermione left for them to give to the post owls.

They retreated into the dining room to read the letter. "It's from Hermione." Mrs. Granger told her husband after breaking the seal. Her facial expression became stonier the longer that she read. By the end of the letter, her hands were shaking in anger. Silently she handed the letter over to her husband and went to the liquor cabinet and poured two stiff drinks.

When Mr. Granger had finally finished reading the letter he picked up the tumbler and knocked back the amber liquid in one gulp. "We have to do something about this. It sounds like Headmaster Dumbledore knows what is going on with Harry's relatives but he refuses to do anything about it."

"We need to keep this quiet though. Harry is a celebrity in the Wizarding world, and so is Dumbledore. Perhaps we should talk to our solicitor and get his opinion?" Mrs. Granger stated.

"I'll call him to set an appointment." Mr. Granger said as he got up from the table to clear away the dishes.

Hermione's mother went over to the desk in the kitchen and began composing a letter to send back with Hedwig.

Across London, there was a very similar conversation occurring at the ancestral home of the Blacks.

"Remus, we can't let Dumbledore place Harry in this kind of danger!" shouted Sirius as he paced back and forth in the drawing room. Harry's letter lay open on the table between them.

"Calm down Sirius. I think that we should offer to help Harry in any way that we can with the tournament. It's what we need to do after the tournament that concerns me more." Lupin stated calmly.

"He can't go back to those horrible people. This house has protections already, and we could put it under the Fidelius Charm with you as the Secret Keeper. Dumbledore can't know about this place, especially if we were to ever bring Harry here." Sirius quietly said. "I need to contact the family solicitor and Gringotts. We need to find out if the reading of James and Lily's will occurred or if they even had one. I would also like to get an inventory of their vaults just to be safe."

Remus was rereading Harry & Hermione's letter when a thought hit him. "Do you still have those mirrors that you and James used when you were in detention? We could send them mirrors so we don't have to use owls all of the time."

Sirius stopped his pacing and turned to face his old friend with a smile; "That's brilliant Moony. I have them upstairs, we could charm a couple more mirrors so you and Hermione can have your own too."

"Great, I'll start on a list of a few spells and books that they should review. We can send a few books from the library here if we find any that could help him." Lupin called out to Sirius's retreating form.

A couple of hours of searching through the library Remus and Sirius had compiled a diverse list of spells and books to send to Harry and Hermione to help with the tournament. Placing everything into a trunk Remus shrunk it and put the Marauder's password onto the small package. "I think that is everything Sirius. Now we just need a way to get this to Harry without it being intercepted." Remus said with a look of deep thought etched on his face.

There was a loud pop and then standing before them was the oddest dressed house elf that they had ever seen before. "Uh..., hello. What can I do for you?" Sirius said to the strange house elf.

"I am Dobby sir, Harry Potter's friend. Do you need a package delivered to the great Harry Potter, sir? Are you his dog father?" Dobby squeaked in his excitement.

Remus lost it at this point, started howling with laughter while Sirius stood there shocked, and bemused at the same time. "Yes, I am his Godfather, Dobby. Are you the elf that Harry freed?"

"I am indeed! Harry Potter has spoken of me to you before?" Dobby asked with tears in his eyes.

Sirius sat on the floor so that he was eye level with the tiny elf "He has told both of us about you. The laughing fool over there is Remus Lupin and I am Sirius Black. Would you be able to help us get this package to Harry? Only give it to him if he is alone or with Hermione Granger please."

"Dobby would be most happy to help out kind sirs. Just call if you have any more packages for Dobby to deliver for Harry Potter!" and with a small pop; the package and Dobby were gone from Grimmauld place.

"You know, I think that was the strangest encounter with a house elf that I have ever had. I thought that only bound house elves knew that their master's needed something and would react accordingly?" Sirius stated with wonder.

Remus looked up deep in thought as he was formulating his response "I think that elf, Dobby, bonded with Harry when he set him free and I don't think that Harry is aware of it yet. Oh, I bet Hermione is going to have a fit over this one. You know how she can get about house elves."

### Chapter 3: A helping hand.

Harry and Hermione were using the map exploring one of the towers when there was a small pop and a house-elf appeared in front of them. "Dobby! What are you doing here?" Harry asked.

"Dobby has a package for you from your dog father and the wolf." as he reached into his robes and pulled out a tiny package with a letter addressed to Harry.

"Thanks, Dobby." Harry laughed as he bent down to take the package. "How did you know that they needed to get a package to me?"

Dobby went a bit wide-eyed and he started to shuffle his feet before he answered, "Dobby is bound to Harry Potter, sir, I had hoped to work in your family home once you were out of school." Then in a mad rush, Dobby launched himself at the wall but before he could ram his head into the wall Harry caught him around the middle and held him still.

"Dobby, relax. You do not need to punish yourself. I'm giving you an order; never punish yourself. If you feel that you did something wrong, please come to me. You're my friend Dobby, why would you bond to me?" Harry asked in confusion.

"I apologize, sir. It was the best way to ensure that I would be able to help you and keep your secrets. And Dobby wanted very much to be Harry Potter's elf." Dobby said in a rush.

Hermione had been silent during the entire exchange between Harry and Dobby. She was upset that Dobby had bound himself to Harry but she was also proud of the way that Harry was dealing with the situation. She knelt down to Dobby's level and looked him in the eye and asked; "Dobby, are you happy being Harry's house-elf?"

"Oh, yes Ms. Mione! Dobby is the happiest elf alive!" Dobby said bouncing on the balls of his feet in excitement.

"Dobby, we know another house-elf that was freed this summer, her name is Winky. Do you know her?" asked Hermione, while Harry chuckled in the background about her nickname.

Dobby looked sadly at his feet and replied, "Yes, Dobby knows Winky. She is most upset at not being a proper house-elf anymore. She is drinking lots of butterbeer and is pining for her old master. I try to look after her in the kitchens but she is very sad."

"Harry, we have to help her. Crouch was wrong to treat her that way and then give her clothes. If what Dobby is saying is true, she must be really depressed." Hermione said, clearly exasperated with the situation.

"I don't know, Hermione. Dobby, do you think that there is anything that we could do to help Winky?" Harry asked the small elf.

Dobby hesitated but he answered in a small voice that sounded unsure of the reaction that he would get, "Harry Potter, sir. Winky wants to bond to a family again. Hogwarts keeps us busy but Winky has lived her entire life in the service of a family and she misses that terribly."

Harry and Hermione looked at each other in silent communication for a few moments and seemed to come to the same conclusion.

"It's okay, Harry. I think it would really help Winky and she seems to like you better than me anyway." Hermione said.

"Okay." Harry tilted his head to the side, called out "Winky." and with a small pop, a disheveled house-elf in a filthy dress appeared next to Dobby.

"How can I be of, hic, assistance?" asked the obviously drunk house-elf.

Harry knelt down so that he was looking into Winky's eyes and he spoke very gently, "Winky, would you like to be a part of a family again?"

The little elf's eyes went wide with surprise and tears began to stream down her tiny face as she wept into her hands. "Winky would love to but no one wants a bad elf." She said sadly between sobs.

Still speaking in a gentle whisper Harry said, "Winky, would you like to join my family? I am the only Potter left right now but someday I would like to have a family and a home to call my own. Dobby has already bound himself to me and we would be happy to have you join our family."

Whatever reaction Harry was expecting, it was not the one that he received. Winky launched herself at Harry and latched her tiny arms around his neck, crying hysterically. After a few moments, Harry was able to calm her down and she finally looked up into his face, "Winky would love to be a part of a family again, Master Harry."

"Alright; Winky, I welcome you into the Potter Family." With a slight discharge of magic, Harry felt the bond form between them. Turning to Dobby, Harry knelt down and repeated the process, formally welcoming him into the Potter family too. "Please make sure that you take time off for yourselves each day because I don't want to see you sick or injured. If you need anything, please come to me and ask. If I can provide it, I will."

Both of the elves looked up at Harry with adoring smiles and they chimed in unison "Of course, Harry Potter, sir."

"Um, I have one question though. What do you two prefer to wear? I know that the Hogwarts elves all have uniforms with the crest on them, or would you like to pick what you wear on your own?" Harry asked with genuine concern.

"Winky will find out what the Potter family crest looks like and will get the design for you. I would like to have the crest on my clothes to show that I am a proper house-elf." Winky said with pride.

"Dobby would like to wear the crest too, Harry Potter, sir." Dobby said enthusiastically.

"That would be great, Winky, I have never seen my family crest before. Of course, you can both wear the family crest. Do you have to be discreet about that here at Hogwarts? I wouldn't want to cause trouble with the other house-elves." Harry said, voicing his concern.

"Master is too kind." Winky said softly. "The other elves will treat us better because we are part of a Wizarding family again."

"That's great!" Harry said with relief evident in his voice. "I have one more question, do you two know of a room that we can train in secret? I have to get ready for the Triwizard Tournament and Hermione is going to help me train. We don't want anyone finding out what we are doing."

"Dobby knows of just the place, Harry Potter, sir. It is the Come and Go Room, or the Room of Requirement." Dobby said with obvious joy at being able to help. "It is on the seventh floor just opposite of the tapestry of Barnabus the Barmy. Walk past the wall three times while thinking of what you need and the room will appear. We elves use it to store things, nasty Mr. Filch has found cleaning supplies there too."

"That sounds perfect Dobby. Thanks. I will call you two if I need anything. Please feel free to help Hermione with anything that she might need, she is very important to me." Harry said while looking at the two elves.

Two small pops later Harry and Hermione were all alone in the tower again. Hermione was beaming at Harry with a look of pride in her eyes. "That was a great thing that you did for Winky. While I don't like the idea of slavery, the change in her was amazing once you bonded and Dobby looked so happy after you formally welcomed him too." With a look of excitement on her face, Hermione pulled Harry to his feet and said, "Now let's go and find the Room of Requirement, I'm dying to see what the room can provide for us and to find out what Snuffles and Remus sent us."

Harry and Hermione arrived at the tapestry of Barnabus the Barmy and after a brief discussion decided that Hermione would be the one to ask the room for what they needed. When the door appeared, they stepped inside and the door sealed itself behind them. There were

dozens of bookcases that lined one of the walls with a fireplace, a desk, a sofa, and a table arranged in the corner of the small makeshift library. The other side of the room had a dueling area with practice dummies, targets, some workout equipment, and a small changing area with a shower. Harry looked over at Hermione and smiled, "I love magic." He said with quiet reverence.

They walked over to the table in the library area, Harry pulled out the shrunken package from Remus and Sirius, and they read the note together. With a big grin on his face Harry pulled out his wand, tapped the package, and said, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good." The package quickly expanded into a small trunk that was surprisingly light.

After they had categorized all of the items in the trunk, and kept a mirror each, Hermione looked deep in thought. "Harry, we can't leave this stuff in here so I think that we will have to shrink the trunk and one of us should carry it around at all times. Some of those books are dark and we could get into trouble if they are in our possession. They definitely would be in the restricted section if they were a part of the Hogwarts Library."

"You're right, of course. It's a very light trunk, even when it's at its normal size, so I think we could just shrink it and one of us can carry it around in our pocket. I do not want to risk leaving it in our book bags. The trunk is amazing though. How did they get all of this stuff in there? My school trunk holds less stuff and it feels like it weighs a ton." Harry said with a touch of awe in his voice.

"I think that they must have enchanted the trunk like most Wizarding homes to be bigger on the inside. The feather-light charm is nice too. That trunk would be too heavy for either of us to lift otherwise." Hermione said to Harry. Suddenly, she got a slight gleam in her eyes and a new book appeared on the table next to her bag. She picked it up, and opened the cover to inspect the contents. A big smile spread across her face and she turned to Harry still smiling. "This is great; this book tells how to enlarge items magically and how to add all sorts of other enchantments to them. This means that we could charm our bags to be lighter and to hold more once we learn these spells!" Hermione almost squealed in her excitement.

Harry pulled out his mirror and while looking at it said, "Sirius Black."

There was a momentary flicker in the mirror and then Sirius's face appeared. "Hello, Harry, Hermione. I see you got our package okay. These mirrors are the ones that your father and I used at school to talk to each other while we were in separate detentions. We also made the second pair of mirrors so all four of us could have one. It will get a little warm when someone calls you. To answer just say their name back into the mirror and they will both be activated."

While Harry was gazing at the mirror in his hand, Hermione picked up her mirror, stepped a few paces away, and called out, "Remus Lupin."

"Hello, Hermione." Remus said with a smile on his face. "From the look on your face I think that you want to know how to charm another set of mirrors? The magic may be a bit beyond you right now but I will gladly do that for you. Who do you want them for?"

"My parents, if they can use them." Hermione said with a hint of hope in her voice. "They only get letters from me using Hedwig, or a school owl, and I thought that this would be better. I miss talking with them."

Remus looked pensive for a moment before replying, "I don't know if they will work or not for non-magical people, but we can at least try. If it doesn't work, have one of the house-elves pick up the mirror from them."

"Thank you, so much!" Hermione cried happily. "Do you happen to have a book on how you created all of this or is it something that I can get from the library easily?"

"It would be in the restricted section at Hogwarts, so I'll send you a copy. Did you find the list of spells that we sent along too? There is also a little book without a title, about the size of a diary that you two should look at immediately." Remus said with a big smile.

Sirius was half listening to Remus' conversation when he heard him mention the book. "Hey!" Sirius shouted. "I wanted to tell them about

the book." By this time, everyone gathered around two mirrors, having shut down the others.

"What book are you two talking about?" asked Harry. Turning to Hermione, he said, "Did you notice a small book without a title? I didn't see it when we were unpacking."

Hermione stepped over to the stack of books and after a few seconds, she came back with a triumphant smile on her face and the book in her left hand. "Here, I think that you should look at this."

Sirius, Remus, and Hermione were all grinning from ear to ear at Harry while he opened the cover. The book looked well read, the edges worn, and some of the pages were dog-eared. As he began to read, the smile on his face grew to match the others. "This is wonderful! You two and my dad wrote a book on how to become Animagi?" Harry was running his fingers along the spine of the book with reverence.

"That book contains all of our notes on the entire process. It should aid you two immensely and speed up the process. The books on Animagi in the Restricted Section are basically useless, that is why there are so few of them around." Sirius beamed at the way Harry was looking at the book. "There are also some supplementary books that you should read that will help you along. They are listed in the front of the journal."

Hermione was peering over Harry's shoulder at the list of additional books and noticed that they were included in the collection from the original Marauders. Looking up at the mirror, Hermione smiled and said, "Thank you both for the help. Harry, I think that you should drop a couple of subjects and add Runes and Arithmancy instead. Divination isn't worth anything with that old fraud teaching, and History of Magic is worthless with Binns droning on about Goblin wars the entire time."

"That's a good idea, Hermione. I think Harry would benefit much more from those classes. Besides, we used a lot of runes and Arithmancy to create the map. They are also very helpful with wards and spell crafting." Remus said with enthusiasm.

Sirius put in his two Knuts worth by adding, "I agree with Remus and Hermione, Harry. You can do independent study in history and divination if you want to take those OWLS at the end of your fifth year. I know that you will be starting a year behind, but I think that between Hermione and Remus that they can catch you up to your year mates in about six or seven months."

The direction the conversation was taking surprised Harry, but he realized that they were all correct. He had only taken those classes because Ron wanted to. "I think that you are correct. I really hate having my death predicted every week by that old fraud, Trelawney, and it is such a chore to even stay awake with Binns droning on in that monotone of his. I'll talk to McGonagall this weekend so I can get my schedule adjusted."

There was a small pop behind them and then they heard Winky call out, "Master Harry Potter has missed dinner. Winky and Dobby will bring you two some food." There was a second pop and Dobby appeared with a picnic basket.

"Thank you both for remembering that we hadn't eaten. Would you like to join us?" Harry asked his two house-elves.

The response was immediate; both of the elves broke down crying saying that they were not worthy and how great Harry Potter was for offering to eat with lowly elves. Before their rant could get too much further Harry piped up, "Please relax. It would be an honor if the two of you would eat with Hermione and me. You can tell me a bit about yourselves and what you like to do and how things should be done in a Wizarding home." Turning back to his mirror, Harry said to a smiling Remus and Sirius, "It looks like we have to go now. I will call you tomorrow to talk. Thanks again for all of your help."

After a nice dinner where Hermione and Harry spent the majority of their time trying to get Dobby and Winky to eat with them, they decided to spend the rest of the evening relaxing and reading on the couches provided by the Room of Requirement. Hermione had picked up a book on the history of the Triwizard Tournament and curled into the corner of the sofa facing the fireplace. Harry was

reading the journal written by his dad, Remus, and Sirius with a smile on his face. It was a quiet moment to end a stressful day and both teens were happy to spend it in each other's presence.

The more Hermione read the book about the Triwizard Tournament, the feeling of dread grew with each page. Sighing, she put the book down and looked up at Harry. He was still reading the journal with a smile on his face. "Harry." Once she had his attention Hermione continued, "I think that the tournament is designed to test you in the most difficult ways possible. The first task challenges your bravery and quick thinking skills. That leaves a wide range of topics and strategies that we have to plan for. Historically, the first task has been to get past, or retrieve an item from, a large magical creature."

Harry had marked his page and placed the journal on the table in front of him. Taking a moment to compose his thoughts before he spoke, Harry finally said, "We need to find out what the first task is going to be. I am positive that the headmasters from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons are going to help their students prepare. The question is how do we find out?"

Hermione was gazing into the fire, lost in thought, before she suddenly smiled. Harry gave her a questioning look and she turned to face him completely. "We can have Dobby and Winky listen to the professors to see if any of them talk about the tasks. Dumbledore certainly knows what each task is and so will Mr. Crouch. Witches and Wizards don't consider house-elves people, just a part of the background, so they won't really pay them any attention."

"That's a brilliant plan, Hermione! We can have Dobby and Winky just pay attention as they go about their regular duties in the castle. One of the teachers is bound to slip up eventually and then we can begin preparing in earnest. We should probably talk to Hagrid too. I really like him but he cannot keep a secret at all. Why Dumbledore tells him stuff sometimes really puzzles me." Harry trailed off, lost in thought again.

Hermione thought that Harry had a great idea and she told him so. "Why don't we head back to the tower and get some sleep? I know that you want to talk to Professor McGonagall in the morning and I

would like to check a few things in the library too. Why don't we meet up after breakfast?"

Harry nodded his ascent, they put their books back into the enchanted trunk, and Hermione pocketed it before they exited the room. They walked back to the tower side by side in silence. Both of them lost in their thoughts about what they were going to do tomorrow. When they reached the common room Hermione pulled Harry into quick hug, whispered good night, and she headed off to her room.

Ron was getting ready for bed when Harry walked into the fourth year boy's dormitory. Before Harry could even make it to his bed, Ron had swung his legs over the side of his bed and accused, "How come you didn't tell me how to put my name in the Goblet? I'm your best friend, you should have told me!"

Dean, Neville, and Seamus looked on in silence as Harry rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I didn't put my name in the Goblet of Fire. Someone else put it in under a different school name. Moody thinks that they used a Confundus Charm on the Goblet to make it think that there are four schools competing. If you cannot accept that then you do not know me at all. Good night." Harry pulled the curtains closed and climbed into bed, his mood ruined by the confrontation with Ron.

Harry awoke before his dorm mates Sunday morning and headed down to the common room to wait for Hermione so that they could go to breakfast together. Fifteen minutes later, she came down the stairs and they went down to the Great Hall. After a light meal, they parted ways with Harry promising to meet up with Hermione in the library as soon as he was finished talking with McGonagall.

Walking up to the staff table Harry stood silently in front of Professor McGonagall waiting for her to acknowledge him. "Mr. Potter, what can I do for you this morning?"

"Could you spare a few minutes to talk about my class schedule when you are finished with breakfast Professor?" Harry asked Professor McGonagall.

"Certainly, Mr. Potter, give me a few minutes and I'll meet you in my office." said Professor McGonagall, as she smiled down at him before returning to her meal.

Twenty minutes later, Harry and Professor McGonagall were sitting in her office behind the transfiguration classroom. "What can I do for you, Mr. Potter? Time tables are set to be handed out at dinner tonight."

"I was hoping to change my course schedule. I wanted to drop divination and history and add Ancient Runes and Arithmancy. Hermione has offered to tutor me so I can catch up to my year mates. I don't mind starting with the third year student's professor." Harry stated with a pleading note in his voice.

"Why do you want to change your schedule Mr. Potter? It is a bit unusual and you will be in class with the third year students in those two new subjects." McGonagall asked Harry politely.

"Well, I only took those two classes because Ron signed up for them. I am tired of Professor Trelawney predicting my death in every lesson and I am sure that it will only get worse with the tournament. History of Magic is a terrible class. I can learn more on my own just by reading the textbook. Why is a ghost teaching that class? All he does is drone on about the Goblin Wars." Harry realized that he might have stepped up on a soapbox and gone a bit too far with what he had said.

Professor McGonagall surprised Harry by bestowing upon him a smile that reached her eyes. "I'm proud of you, Mr. Potter. I think that you could give Ms. Granger a run for her money if you really wanted to. Your work in my class is very good once you grasp the theory. I will approve your changes and let the other professors know that you will be in those classes. You will need to order the books by owl, but I'm sure that Ms. Granger could lend you her textbooks from last year."

"Thank you very much Professor. I'll do my best to not let you down." Harry stated and he walked out the door of her office to join Hermione in the library and give her the good news.

Walking into the library, Harry found Hermione at her favorite table with a small mountain of books surrounding her. He sat down next to her and pulled a book towards him. “Did you find anything useful?”

“I found a few things about the tournament and I don’t really like what I discovered. You have to compete in every event, even if you don’t complete a task, so there is no point in just throwing the tournament.” Hermione said in frustration. “How did your talk with Professor McGonagall go?”

Harry smiled, and proceeded to tell her about getting his schedule changed. He also mentioned that Professor McGonagall told him that she was proud of him for doing the right thing. “Hermione, could I borrow your texts from Runes and Arithmancy? I can owl order some new ones this week.”

“Of course Harry. I will even give you my notes so you can read ahead and catch up to the rest of the class. If you have any questions just ask and I’ll do my best to explain it.” Hermione stated simply.

“Thanks.” Harry had picked up one of the books on the Triwizard Tournament that Hermione had on the table and was flipping through the chapters idly. He came across one chapter that caused him to start reading in earnest. After completing the chapter, he put down the book and looked over at Hermione. “Hermione,” when she put down her book and looked up at him, he continued speaking, “Do you think that there will be a traditional ball with this tournament too?” Harry handed her the book that he had been reading and pointed to the chapter on the Champions Ball.

“I’m sure there will be. Dress robes were a part of our school lists this year. Did you get yours?”

“I don’t know. Mrs. Weasley did all of my school shopping for me while we were at the World Cup. If she didn’t, do you think that I could get a set in Hogsmeade before the dance?”

“I think so. Gladraggs has a store near the Three Broomsticks. If you do not like the ones that she selected, or did not get, we can go down together and pick something up for you. Do you know how to dance,

Harry?" Hermione had a smile on her face as she asked Harry about dancing.

"Uh, not really. I don't want to make a fool of myself in front of three schools by being the only champion that cannot dance. Do you know how to dance? Could you teach me?" Harry pleaded with Hermione.

"Of course, Harry. I would be happy to teach you how to dance. I am positive that the room will provide us with music to help you learn. My parents taught me how to dance this summer when they saw dress robes on our lists." Hermione noticed that Harry had a longing look on his face when she said this and she realized that Harry must have been thinking about his mother teaching him how to dance if she had been alive.

"Thanks. I don't think that I would be comfortable learning how to dance in front of a bunch of people and I know that I'm going to be rubbish at dancing." Harry said miserably.

Hermione leaned over and grabbed his hand. "No you won't, Harry. You are very graceful when you are flying and if you treat dancing just like Quidditch, you will be fine."

Suddenly, Harry had a panicked look on his face, as if he had realized there was something that made him extremely nervous. "Hermione, I'll have to get a date for the ball won't I?" When he saw her nod, he looked up at her and said, "Would you go to the ball with me?"

Hermione's smile was radiant. She looked happier than he had seen her in ages. "I would love to go to the ball with you, Harry."

He felt as if he had one less burden to bear now that he had a date. Harry relaxed and smiled back at Hermione while giving her hand a gentle squeeze. "Thank you. Is there anything that I need to buy for you? I've never been on a date before."

"We can get a corsage for me and a boutonniere for your dress robes that match each other. I don't know of any Wizarding flower stores but I'm sure Neville could help us pick something out and put them

together.” Hermione said while still smiling at Harry’s straightforward, innocent, manner. “Don’t worry, Harry. We have months before the ball, it is traditionally around Christmas. Do you want to tell people that we are going to the ball together if they ask?” Hermione’s voice sounded hopeful but concerned at the same time.

“Sure. I mean, I don’t fancy being hounded by a bunch of girls that I do not know who all want to go to the ball with The-Boy-Who-Lived. I’m glad that we are going to the ball together.” Harry spoke with conviction.

Hermione had another big smile on her face after listening to Harry tell her that he was happy that they were going to the ball together. In truth, she was worried that she was not pretty, but Harry didn’t see her that way at all. He knew her and accepted her for who she was, not what she looked like. What Hermione did not realize, was that Harry did think that she was beautiful and that he was the lucky one.

Packing up her books, Hermione stood up and asked, “Would you help me put these back on the shelves and then we can go practice a bit?”

Harry stood up, grabbed the second stack of books, and began putting them back on the shelves. “Sure. Can we stop by the dormitory first? I want to grab a couple of things from my trunk.”

“Okay. I’ll meet you back here in a couple of minutes.” After gathering up the books, Hermione was moving between the shelves with practiced ease.

When they had finally entered the Room of Requirement, Hermione asked Harry, “What did you need in the dorms?”

“I decided that I am going to keep the map and my cloak in the new trunk now. My school trunk isn’t really that secure and I don’t want to risk losing either of those items.” Harry stated.

The Room of Requirement looked the same as it did when Hermione had first called it into being the day before. Looking around in wonder

at all the room provided, Harry walked over to the library area, took off his cloak, and draped it across the back of the couch.

He flopped down onto the couch after grabbing the spell list from Sirius and Remus out of the resized trunk. Hermione had come over and was sitting on the other end of the couch with her feet tucked under her as she began reading one of the books about the history of the tournament. After about an hour of reading, Harry wanted to try a couple of the new spells. The Room of Requirement responded by providing a practice dummy in the dueling area.

Getting up from the couch, Harry called over to Hermione, "I'm going to try out a few of these spells that Snuffles and Moony gave us." He walked over to the dueling area and stood fifteen feet from the practice dummy. Pulling his wand from his sleeve, he called out, "Reducto." The force of the spell knocked the dummy back about six feet and left a smoking chest plate with a hole in it where his spell had hit.

Hermione had put down her book and was watching Harry practice. When she saw what the spell had done to the training dummy, she got up from her spot and joined Harry in the dueling area. "Harry, do you mind if I practice with you?"

"No. Do you know the wand movement for Reducto?"

Hermione gave Harry a look that plainly conveyed that she did indeed know the spell and proper wand movement. Harry smirked at her and reset the training dummy on the platform, then stepped behind Hermione so he would not distract her.

"Reducto." Hermione cried aloud while taking aim at the target. The spell knocked the dummy almost three feet back, the hole in the chest was only about half the size of the one that Harry's spell had created. "Wow. That is a strong spell. I didn't do as much damage as you did though. I always knew that you were a powerful wizard."

"Thanks, Hermione, but I'm nothing special. I may be powerful but I'm not a great wizard or anything." Harry said softly while looking at the damaged training dummy.

"Harry, please look at me." When he had turned to face Hermione, she continued. "You are a powerful wizard. The difference in our results clearly shows that. I do believe you will be a great wizard one day. You have already done some amazing things that most adult wizards and witches will never do, nor would most of them want or be able to." Hermione said with conviction. Seeing that Harry was about to argue this point, Hermione held up her hand and cut him off before he could begin. "Trust me, Harry. You are becoming a great wizard and an even better man."

## Chapter 4: Shattered notions.

The rest of September passed in a blur for Harry and Hermione. They spent all of their time outside of classes in the Room of Requirement completing their homework, preparing for the tournament, and for Harry, learning to dance. They were both sitting on the couch in the library section that the room had provided when Winky popped in.

"Hello Winky." Harry and Hermione called at the same time to the tiny elf.

Winky gave a small curtsy and began speaking. "Good afternoon Sir and Miss. Winky has found out what the first task is from Professor Moody when he was talking with the Headmaster. Master Harry Potter has to get by a dragon and retrieve a golden egg." Winky was clearly agitated as she stood there wringing the hem of her apron in her hands.

"Dragons!" Hermione practically shouted. Standing up and beginning to pace around the room she began muttering under her breath about "Irresponsible adults." and "Insanely dangerous tournaments."

Coming out of his stupor, Harry knelt down in front of Winky and he gave her a hug. "Thank you very much Winky. You did a great job."

The surprised elf patted Harry on the back and gave a muttered "Thank you." before popping out of the Room of Requirement.

Getting up from his spot on the floor, Harry walked over to Hermione and pulled her into a hug. After a few moments of listening to her mumble about crazy wizards and their stupid tournaments, he spoke softly to her, "Hey, its okay. Now that we know what I need to do we can start focusing on getting that golden egg."

Hermione gave Harry's waist one last squeeze before she pulled back from the embrace and went over to her bag to retrieve the communication mirror. She called out "Remus Lupin." as she sat down next to Harry on the couch.

After a few seconds Remus' face appeared in the mirror and he said; "Hello Harry; Hermione." He turned his face to the side and called out "Sirius come here, Harry and Hermione are calling."

When Sirius had joined them, they both listened as Harry and Hermione explained the first task. It turned out that Remus was a veritable fount of knowledge when it came to dragons but in the end, it was a suggestion from Hermione that caused everyone to pause and look at her in bewilderment.

Getting a bit nervous Hermione cried out "What? Nowhere did the teachers mention anything about having to battle the dragon. You should summon the egg. That way you don't have to get too close to it."

Grinning like a lunatic Harry had a look of pride and joy on his face. "You are absolutely brilliant! Do you think that it will work?" Harry asked hopefully.

"I do, but in case that the egg is spelled against summoning we should come up with a back up plan." Hermione stated simply.

Remus and Sirius were both grinning at the pair of them and thinking to themselves that Hermione was really a lot brighter than they had guessed. The plan was so simple that most wizards would overlook it. After some deliberation between the four of them, they decided that if the original plan did not work Harry would summon his broom and use that to get by the dragon.

The last Friday of November brought forth a completely new batch of problems for Harry. Their Defense against the Dark Arts class was good because their instructor, Alastor Moody, was actually teaching them useful offensive and defensive hexes, charms, curses, and counter curses. However, today they were covering the three unforgivable curses. What no one had expected was that Moody would actually demonstrate the curses. He Crucio'd one spider into mindlessness and only stopped when Hermione cried out because it was affecting Neville so badly. Afterwards he demonstrated the killing curse on the poor arachnid. To top it all off he used the Imperious Curse to make another spider do what ever he wished. Then, to the

absolute horror of the class, he informed them that he was going to place each of them under the curse so that they could feel the effects and to try to fight it off.

Harry was the only one in the entire class to throw off the spell. As they were leaving the class, he could not help but hear the mutterings of his year mates and he knew that before the end of the day the entire school would know what he had done. To make matters even worse Harry had spotted the Slytherins, and quite a few members of the rest of the houses, sporting “Potter Stinks” badges.

The only good part of the badges was seeing Hermione worked up on his behalf. As they were sitting down to lunch at the corner of the Gryffindor table she began her rant; “Why aren’t the teachers making people remove those buttons? They are insulting and just down right mean.” Hermione cried out while gesturing wildly with her fork full of Sheppard’s Pie.

“I don’t know Hermione. I guess that things are just different in the Wizarding world. Look at that article that Skeeter woman wrote about me. I never said any of those things! She turned a bunch of my ums and ers into long winded sentences about me crying over my parent’s memories!” Harry had become agitated during his response and now a good portion of the Gryffindor table was silent, listening in on their conversation.

Realizing that the rest of the table was listening in, Harry gave them all a hard glare and resumed eating his lunch in silence. When they were both finished, Hermione told Harry that she wanted to speak with Professor McGonagall about the badges. Shrugging his shoulders in acceptance, Harry walked with Hermione to the professor’s office.

“Professor?” Hermione called out while knocking on the transfiguration teacher’s door.

Minerva McGonagall looked up and saw two of her students in the doorway. “Please come in the both of you. Now what can I do for you?”

Hermione fidgeted with her hands for a moment before speaking. "Why aren't any of the teachers doing anything about those horrible badges? Can you make them take them off?"

"I'm sorry Mr. Potter, but I can't do anything about the badges but I do understand, and I agree with your sentiments Ms. Granger." Professor McGonagall spoke in tones of resignation.

"Do you mean can't or won't Professor?" Harry asked with a bit of an edge to his voice.

Taking a moment to compose her thoughts Professor McGonagall replied; "I can't Mr. Potter, I'm sorry. I am not allowed to step in and correct the problem at the current time."

Harry had started to put things together in his head and so had Hermione if the look on her face was any indication. Harry had one more question on his mind that he wanted to ask before Mt. Hermione erupted in indignation. "Why won't professor Dumbledore let you make people remove the badges?"

With a sad look on her face Minerva McGonagall answered; "Because Professor Dumbledore thinks that this is a good way to learn to ignore what people are saying about you while also learning how to forgive them for their mistakes. I want you both to know that I do not agree with this at all."

Her answer was enough to shatter both teens remaining trust in Albus Dumbledore. For Harry it was another betrayal by an adult, further cementing in his mind that most of them could not be trusted. There were a few exceptions to that rule but that did not make Harry feel any better. The last of Harry's childhood died in Professor McGonagall's classroom that afternoon. He knew that he would have to make sure that he looked out for his own interests and safety from now on with a little help from Hermione and those few adults that he could trust.

Hermione had been trying to come to grips with the changes in her worldview but Professor McGonagall's revelation destroyed her long-standing faith in authority figures. She felt a wide range of emotions

but the prevalent one was loss. It felt as if someone had taken the safe, secure feeling, which comes from the belief that someone in authority will always be there to help you and then told her that it was all a lie. No one was coming to help; you are on your own.

Without another word, Harry and Hermione slowly got up and walked out of Professor McGonagall's office and out onto the grounds to think things over. Once they were seated on a large rock down by the lake Harry turned to Hermione and asked the one question that was really bothering her too. "Why?"

Hermione was at as much of a loss as Harry was and she replied; "I don't know. I always thought that Dumbledore had your best interests at heart. Now I don't think he does at all. It's as if he is testing you for a reason that only he seems to know." Hermione's confusion was evident in her voice.

"What do you think we should do about this then? Half of the time, I want to attack Malfoy for making those stupid badges and the other half I want to curse Dumbledore for allowing it to continue. I think that he let Moody put the Imperious Curse on everyone to see if I could throw it off. Was putting me with the Dursleys' some sort of test too? What about everything else that we have gotten into at Hogwarts the last three years?" Harry had become so agitated during his tirade that he had begun to pace the shoreline like an animal trapped in a cage.

Hermione got up and stepped in front of Harry to stop his pacing so she could answer him. "Well, since Professor McGonagall can't do anything about the buttons, perhaps we should. We can ask Snuffles and Moony for some ideas. I don't know about the Dursleys', Harry but my parents should have some news on that front in a few days according to their last letter. I'm not sure what to think about Dumbledore doing all of those things to test you but it does make sense. The question is why is he testing you? Do you think that it has to do with Voldemort?"

Harry sighed as he felt some of the tension leave him with Hermione's hug. "I don't know but that is the only thing that I can think of too. I know that Dumbledore says that Voldemort isn't dead but why did he come after me in the first place? Did you know that

Voldemort told me his real name down in the Chamber of Secrets? It's Tom Marvolo Riddle, Voldemort is an anagram of his name. Do you think we should look him up to see if we can find anything out about why he attacked me?"

"I don't know why he attacked you but that is a good idea. We should probably ask Snuffles and Moony all of those questions soon. Come on, why don't we head on up to the Room and give them a call." Hermione said as she grabbed Harry's hand and started up towards the castle.

## Chapter 5: Meet the Dursleys.

Back in Crawley, Hermione's parents were putting the final additions on their project before heading off to confront the Dursleys. The information that their private investigator and solicitor had dug up would go a long way in making sure that Vernon and Petunia complied. Harry had provided them with enough information to piece together his childhood, or the distinct lack thereof, and the fact that the Dursleys did not want anyone to know that they were less than perfect.

John Granger had begun a business relationship with Vernon Dursley using their dental practice's drill needs. Tonight's dinner was supposed to be to finalize the deal of the year for Vernon. Unbeknownst to Vernon, John Granger had very different plans for the evening.

Dinner was a very normal affair for both parties. Petunia really was a good host and the dinner conversation was polite but a little bland. When the time came for the after-dinner drinks and business talk, Vernon Dursleys' world turned upside down.

"I have a few conditions before I sign this contract Mr. Dursley." John Granger spoke as he pulled out his notepad from his dinner jacket.

"First, you will ask for a transfer to the Australian Branch of Grunnings. I have a large group of friends in Sydney and Melbourne and they all have long term drill needs. I would like you to be their account manager. This is a very large account and a definite pay raise for you if you accept. You will still be my account manager here too." Mr. Granger paused to let this information sink in. He was not disappointed to see that Vernon really wanted this position but could not take it because of Harry Potter.

Vernon Dursley had mixed feelings. He desperately wanted the new position and the pay raise. The problem was that blasted Potter boy and his freak minders. The letter that they had received with Harry all those years ago forbid them from moving because of the protections put in place. It was with a heavy heart, and a promise to make Harry's life a living hell when he returned for ruining another business deal for

him, that he spoke to turn down the offer. "Mr. Granger, I'm afraid that I can't accept the offer as much as I want to."

"Why is that, Mr. Dursley?" John knew the reason but he wanted to hear Vernon explain his reasons. He wanted to close the deal without using the blackmail material but he would use it if he absolutely had to.

"We have custody of our nephew and he is currently away at a boarding school. If we were to move away it would cause all sorts of problems." Vernon said while squirming a bit in his seat. The sight of Mr. Granger grinning broadly at his remark did nothing to ease his tension level.

"You are referring to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry then?" John said in a completely normal tone.

Vernon Dursleys response was exactly what Mr. Granger had predicted. All color drained from Vernon's face and he spluttered "What?"

"My daughter is a student there and she is a very good friend of Harry's." John knew that this would really push Vernon over the edge and he was not disappointed. Vernon had turned a nasty shade of puce before standing up and putting the sofa between them as a defensive barrier.

"You're one of them aren't you?" Vernon whispered at Mr. Granger.

Remaining seated and in a completely calm tone of voice John replied, "No. I'm just like you but my daughter is a witch and I have a way to solve your guardianship problem."

Seeing that he wasn't' going to be attacked by some freakish means Vernon Dursley sat back down on the sofa and asked "How?"

With an internal smile, John Granger knew he had won. Vernon and Petunia Dursley desperately wanted to rid themselves of their nephew. "Let my wife and I take over guardianship of Harry. We

already know about the magical world and have made arrangements to have our house protected."

For the first time in the entire conversation, Petunia spoke up as she and Mrs. Granger walked into the living room with the tea service. "We can't leave. Dumbledore said that there were protections from our being family that meant that he had to stay here for them to remain in place."

Leaning forward in his seat, John Granger motioned for Petunia to join them in the living room. "Were you ever really given a choice in the matter?" Upon seeing their negative response Mrs. Granger continued speaking; "Then why should you listen to someone who has not once checked up on Harry in the time that he has stayed here."

"How did you know that?" gasped Petunia.

"Harry told my daughter everything that he has ever experienced since he came to live here with you." Seeing the scared looks on their faces John resumed speaking; "I mean everything." He said while putting emphasis on the last word and staring into both of their faces with a look of disgust plainly visible.

The Dursleys grew noticeably paler at this revelation before Vernon spoke up. "What do we need to do?" He realized that Mr. Granger could make life very difficult for them if he wanted to.

With a smile, John Granger pulled the transfer of guardianship papers out of his briefcase for the Dursleys to sign. "This is the legal paperwork to transfer guardianship of Harry to my family. My solicitor has already walked everything through the courts and all that is needed are your signatures." John explained as he pushed the paperwork with a pen across the coffee table. "We are even going to petition for an adoption to further solidify our status as Harry's guardians."

Looking over the paperwork quickly, both Vernon and Petunia signed their names on the indicated lines and passed the document back to

Mr. Granger. "Excellent. Now we need to discuss your move. I have been informed that your house is probably under surveillance."

The looks on the Dursleys' faces were priceless. They were a mixture of outrage and fear, with fear winning out in the end. "How are we going to get away without them finding out then?" Vernon asked with a hint of fear creeping into his voice.

"Don't take anything with you. We are not sure what other measures Dumbledore has taken to watch over your family. Once we have checked everything out we will have a moving company send your items to you." John explained to the shocked Dursleys. The plan was to have Dobby and Winky check over everything and then magically send it to them but Mr. Granger did not feel the need to explain that part of Remus Lupins' plan to them since magic made them so uncomfortable.

"I'll arrange everything at the office then and hopefully we can be gone in a couple of weeks." Vernon said in a business like tone. Now more than ever, he wanted his family shot of the magical world. He felt violated and a bit unsafe in his own home after all of the revelations this evening. Petunia was nodding in approval from her perch on the edge of the sofa.

Understanding that everything that needed to taken care of was finished, John Granger slid the signed drill contract over to Vernon Dursley with a list of the contacts in Australia. "Get Grunnings to handle the sale of your house for you. That way people will have a harder time tracking you once you are gone. If you would like, we can have someone visit you in your new home and provide some protections for you too. Thank you for you time and a wonderful meal. It was a pleasure doing business with you." After shaking both of their hands, the Grangers left the house, climbed into the rented Mercedes, and headed off to meet Remus in London to retrieve their own car. Remus Lupin had rented the car to prevent anyone tracing it to the Grangers new residence.

## Chapter 6: Admitting the truth.

Finished with his lunch, Harry walked over to the Hufflepuff table and approached Cedric. Nervously, he said, "Excuse me, Cedric. Can I talk to you for a moment?"

Looking up at the fourth Champion, Cedric shrugged his shoulders and waved Harry into the seat next to him. Once Harry was seated, he asked, "What can I do for you, Potter?"

Harry gave the equivalent of a mental shrug and figured that if Cedric trusted his friends to hear this conversation, why should he care who heard it. Trudging forward, he leaned over the table and whispered, "Do you know what the first task is yet?"

Cedric hesitated slightly before shaking his head in the negative.

Harry misinterpreted Cedric's hesitation for ignorance of the situation so he said, "The first task is dragons. We have to retrieve a golden egg from it. The other champions probably know so I thought that you should too." Finished putting his conscience at ease, Harry got up from the table before Cedric could say anything and headed back over to where Hermione was waiting for him to head back up to the Gryffindor Tower to grab their books for their afternoon classes.

Defense Against the Dark Arts class was over and just as Harry was about to leave Professor Moody barked, "Potter, I want to have a quick chat with you." Moody looked over at Hermione and said, "Head to your next class Ms. Granger, I'll send Potter along with a note."

Hermione hesitated a moment before nodding in acceptance and headed off to their next class after giving Harry a silent plea to stay alert. Neither of them was completely comfortable with Professor Moody and didn't like the thought of leaving the other alone with the man.

Harry followed the professor back to his office with a pretty good idea of what their chat was going to be about but at the same time a bit

nervous. He kept his hand on his wand in his pocket while he followed his professor.

Once they were both sitting, Moody asked, "Have you figured out how you are going to get past the first task?"

Unsure of whether or not Professor Moody was offering to help him or not, Harry answered with his own question. "Are you going to talk to Cedric too?"

Harry's question seemed to surprise Moody before he recovered. "Mr. Diggory has known about the task for a while now and I'm sure that he has worked out his plan already. I want to make sure that you are prepared as well. Someone entered your name in this tournament to discredit or kill you, perhaps both." Moody said solemnly.

Harry was a bit angry at the implication that Cedric knew and had not planned to tell him but he would ask him about that in the near future. "Have you found out who put my name in the Goblet yet, sir?"

"No we haven't, but as soon as we do you can be sure that I will confront them about it. Now, what are you going to do about your dragon? What are you going to do to get past it?"

Harry paused for a moment in thought. He really didn't want to tell Moody his plans for some reason. "Well, I've found a few mentions of books with spells to take on a dragon but all of them are in the restricted section so I can't get a good look at them. Would you be able to write me a pass so I can check them out?"

Moody gazed at Harry with a look of pride and something else that Harry couldn't identify. Without saying a word, Professor Moody pulled out a restricted section pass and signed it for Harry. "That pass is good for the whole year. That way you can look up spells to help you for all of the tasks."

As Harry picked up the pass he said, "Thank you professor." moving towards the exit so he could find Hermione.

Just as he reached the door, Professor Moody called out quietly, “Be sure to check out “Dancing with Dragons.” I think that you will find it a very helpful read.”

Harry finally caught up with Hermione in the Gryffindor Common room. She was sitting with Neville going over some notes from Transfiguration. He flopped down next to her on the sofa and leaned into her shoulder. “Hello Hermione, Neville. When you two are finished, would you like to go down to the Great Hall for dinner? I’m starving.”

Sure. That would be nice.” Hermione said.

“Do you mind if I change first?” Neville asked.

“Now worries, mate. I’m knackered anyway, but my pillow is kind of lumpy.” Harry said with a grin on his face as he poked Hermione in the shoulder.

“Prat.” Hermione said as she poked him back with a smile on her face. Inside she was quite pleased to have Harry leaning on her. He was getting more used to her hugs but it was still rare for him to initiate contact. It meant that he was finally getting more comfortable with giving and receiving physical contact and comfort. The fact that she was the recipient of his affections made it even better in her mind.

Hermione had always felt drawn to Harry since her first year. With each subsequent year, something happened that seemed to draw them closer. During their second year, two things really stood out in her mind.

The first thing was her accident with the Polyjuice Potion during the first term. By using cat hair by mistake, she had morphed into a half girl/half cat and it took Madam Poppy Pomfrey a couple of weeks to put her straight.

Harry visited every evening to bring her his notes and the homework for her classes. Ron did not visit very often and then it was only if Harry dragged him along. Hermione later found out that Harry had

volunteered to get everything for her before Professor McGonagall could ask or assign anyone else.

What really surprised her was the depth of Harry's notes. They were well organized and written, very different from his homework assignments that he handed in. Looking back on that fact now, Hermione could easily spot the Dursleys' influence on Harry's school performance.

Harry had kept underperforming in class so he would not stand out. This trait was something that Hermione was desperately trying to change. It was holding him back and that was something she could not stand.

The last few weeks had actually seen Harry slowly coming out of his Dursley imposed shell. The isolation forced upon him by being the unwilling fourth Triwizard Champion actually focused Harry's studies. He had to work hard because he was at a three-year disadvantage in his magical education compared to the other champions.

Ironically, it was also the realization that someone was out to kill him that lit a fire in him to improve and learn everything that he could. That same realization further crystallized her feelings for him.

The other second year incident clarified her feelings for Harry, was being petrified by the Basilisk. When she had awoken, Madam Poppy Pomfrey informed her that Harry visited her every day and either talked to her or just sat there and held her hand. She could not feel him holding her hand, but she could hear Harry talking to her occasionally.

However, her concept of time passing was non-existent, so she had no real idea how long she had lain there, petrified. Madam Poppy Pomfrey had even told her how she had caught Harry sneaking in during the middle of the night in his invisibility cloak to sit with her. What surprised Hermione was that Madam Pomfrey had seen Harry but never said anything to him. She informed Hermione that he looked so lost and sad that she hadn't the heart to send him away.

It was probably the first time that she had ever hugged Harry. Thinking back, she noticed that he did not flinch away from her hug; he even returned it with a hug of his own. She figured it must have been Harry's relief at seeing her better that overcame his aversion to being touched.

Their third year was just as dangerous and thrilling as their first two at Hogwarts. The time turner was both a blessing and a curse for Hermione that year. She took too many classes but it was Dumbledore's suggestion that they use the time turner to save Sirius and Buckbeak that made that whole, crazy, year worth it.

Ironically, their use of the Time Turner allowed them to save themselves and put them at risk at the same time. Harry's Patronus had really amazed her. Professor Lupin had taught the spell to Harry to combat the effects of the Dementors. The whole school had seen Harry's Patronus charge down Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle during a Quidditch match.

However, that Patronus was nothing compared to the one that he cast to save Sirius and himself. The power and emotion behind that particular Patronus had been tremendous. It had driven off over one hundred of the Dementors. Most adults could not even cast the spell and those that could usually could not drive off more than a few at one time.

Hermione knew during her first year that Harry was going to be a very powerful wizard. The question was how powerful was he going to be if he could drive off over one hundred of the foulest creatures on Earth at the age of thirteen?

Hermione didn't know if it was power that drew her to Harry or not. What she did know was that when she was near him she felt comforted, safe, and loved. The other thing that amazed her was how her own magic felt when she was close to Harry. It felt like it was singing in her veins when he was nearby. However, when they touched it felt like her magic roared. She had yet to discuss it with Harry to see if he experienced the same thing.

Hermione Granger realized that she was in love with Harry Potter and it thrilled and scared her at the same time. She was almost positive that he was in love with her too. With those thoughts on her mind, the rest of the day passed in a blur of sight and sound.

The morning before the first task found a lone figure and a snowy owl out by the Great Lake. The first rays of sunshine were peaking over the castle casting orange reflections of light on the surface of the lake.

Hedwig had perched herself on Harry's shoulder and he was rubbing the nape of her neck while talking softly to her. "I'm scared, Hedwig. People have died in this tournament and I'm not sure that I'm ready." Hedwig had turned her head to get Harry to scratch a different spot, causing him to chuckle at her antics. "Thanks, Hedwig. I'm glad that I can count on you to help keep me in line. If it weren't for Hermione, you, Sirius, Remus, Winky, Dobby, & Hermione's parents I don't know what I would do, probably just go crazy."

Careful not to disturb Hedwig's perch on his shoulder, Harry walked over and sat down on the large rock where he and Hermione sat together in early October when he found out that he was one of the Champions. Sighing at his predicament, Harry continued pouring his feelings and concerns out to his familiar. "I really want to do well in this tournament, not for myself, but for Hermione and everyone that has helped me." Hedwig was nuzzling her head into the palm of Harry's hand and he gave her a brief smile before he continued talking to her. "Especially, Hermione." Harry said quietly. "I don't know what to do though. I think I'm in love with her but how do I tell her without ruining our friendship?"

Harry heard a twig snap behind him and when he turned around he saw Hermione standing there crying softly but with a large smile on her face. Concerned, Harry closed the gap between them and asked, "Are you okay Hermione?" while pulling her into a gentle hug.

"Never better." She mumbled into his neck. After a few seconds, she pulled back so she could look into his eyes. "I love you too, Harry." and without another word she leaned into Harry's embrace and kissed him.

Standing next to the lake, Harry and Hermione shared their first kiss as the sun finally rose fully above Hogwarts, bathing them both in its warmth as Hedwig watched from a branch in a nearby tree. When they finally pulled apart, they both had huge smiles on their faces. Their thoughts were both jumbled with emotions but one thing stood out above the all others, no other words were necessary. It was simply magical.

Harry didn't even realize that he had tears flowing down his cheeks until Hermione reached up and brushed a few away with her thumb while cupping his face. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, Hermione. It's just that you are the first person that I can remember telling me that you love me. I am sure that my parents said it, but I don't remember them. Thank you. Hearing that from you means more to me than I could ever begin to explain."

"Oh, Harry!" Hermione whispered as she pulled him into her arms and hugged him hard. "I've been in love with you for ages, I just didn't put it all together until recently, but from now on I'll make sure that you will always know that I love you." She declared.

Hearing Hermione's declaration of love caused him to hug her a bit tighter while thinking about how much he loved her too. While he was holding her, Harry began to feel his magic roaring through his veins like never before. The feeling was amazing and he instinctively knew that it tied into his love for Hermione.

What Harry was unaware of was that Hermione's magic was reacting with his. She could feel the power radiating from Harry as his emotions washed through him. It was almost intoxicating and she discovered that she had never felt better. Her magic seemed to be pulsing in time with the surges from Harry.

Neither of them noticed the flare of magic around them because of the sunlight that was shining down on them from above the castle turrets. Without a conscious thought, they both pulled back enough from their embrace to share another kiss. This time however, they both felt the pulse of magic while they kissed.

"Did you feel that, Harry?" Hermione asked with a blush on her cheeks.

"Wow! I don't know what that was but it was amazing! I have never felt my magic like that before. It felt alive, like it had finally found something that it was missing." Harry said with a wistful expression on his face. "What did you feel Hermione?"

"It was incredible." Hermione whispered in a reverent tone. "My magic has been reacting strongly around you for the past month or so but this felt different. I felt safe, content, and loved, almost as if I was coming home. I can still feel your magic surrounding us. I'm not sure what it is but it feels right, there is something else but I can't seem to put it into words." Hermione's eyes went unfocused as Harry watched her sort through her thoughts and feelings. As she closed her eyes, a smile spread across her face and Hermione proved why she was the smartest witch of her generation. "It's love, Harry! I can feel it if I concentrate on the magic." She cried out as she opened her eyes to gaze at him.

Harry concentrated on the feeling of magic around them as she had done. "I can feel it too! There is something else though. It's almost as if we're connected somehow. If I focus enough, I can feel your magic mixing with mine. What does that mean though?"

They were both startled from their thoughts by two simultaneous pops as Dobby and Winky arrived. Both elves looked deliriously happy for some reason. Then without warning, they launched themselves into Harry's legs hugging him and then just as quickly they repeated the process with Hermione. The two tiny elves were practically bouncing up and down in their excitement.

Harry asked, "What's going on?"

"Master Harry doesn't know?" Winky asked tentatively. Both Harry and Hermione shook their heads no, so Winky continued with a smile on her face. "You have bonded! We could feel it so we came right away to see Master Harry and Mistress Mione. Dobby was nodding his head vigorously in agreement with Winky."

"What? How?" Harry asked as he unconsciously pulled Hermione closer to him.

To Harry's surprise it was Hermione who answered the question. "Of course!" she beamed as she figured out what had happened between them. Then as the ramifications of the bond set in, Hermione paled considerably, "Oh, Oh, Oh!"

Fearing that Hermione might start hyperventilating, Harry quickly led her back to the boulder and pulled her onto his lap while rubbing her back. After a few moments, and a glass of water for Hermione courtesy of Dobby, he asked, "Um, could you please explain the bond to me?"

She shifted in his lap so she could look into his eyes as she told him the details about the bonding. "Harry, bonded couples are really rare. Our magic is very compatible and we are now connected magically." Fresh tears began spilling from Hermione's eyes and she wrapped Harry into a hug as she sobbed. "Oh, Harry! I am so sorry! I didn't mean for this to happen."

Confused, Harry held her until her sobs stopped before he asked, "What's so bad about this? We both love each other right?" Feeling her nod yes in his shoulder, Harry continued, "I can't really picture anyone else in my life like this except you. You accept me for me and I love you that much more because of that. You also make me want to be a better person."

"Oh Harry! You don't understand, do you? We are married in the eyes of magic. This is very old magic in its purest form, and it's permanent."

Harry sat there completely stunned. He was married at fourteen! As he sat there, thinking things through, he concluded there really was not anyone else he could see himself with in his life. "Hermione, are you okay with this?"

She nodded yes, as she continued to cling to him tightly.

Very carefully, Harry stood Hermione up before dropping to one knee in front of her. Her eyes became as large as saucers as she realized what he was about to do. "Hermione Jean Granger, will you marry me?"

"Yes!" Hermione cried as she pulled Harry to his feet, melted into his embrace, and kissed him, pouring all of her love into the kiss.

The surge of magic from this kiss was much stronger than the last one. They discovered that they could now sense each other's emotions easily if they concentrated on their bond.

When they finally separated from their kiss, they were both smiling with tears in their eyes. Dobby and Winky were still standing there both weeping tears of joy.

"Dobby, Winky; do you mind if we have some time alone? We'll call you if we need something." Harry promised the elves.

With a quick nod, both elves disappeared with a pop.

Harry held out his hand to Hermione and with a smile she slipped her hand into his and they set off for a walk around the lake. After a few minutes of companionable silence Hermione asked, "What are we going to tell my parents, Sirius, & Remus?"

"The truth." Harry said simply. "But I think that we should tell them in person. It is going to be very hard on all of them, especially your parents. Is there a book that would help explain the bonding?"

"Of course, I can have Dobby or Winky pick up a copy of the book and we can give it to them during the holidays."

Stopping on the far side of the lake Harry turned to Hermione and said, "I love you, Mrs. Potter." as he leaned in and gave her a gentle kiss.

"I love you too, Mr. Potter." Hermione said beaming back at him.

After a few moments staring into each other's eyes Hermione said, "We had better head on up to the castle so you can grab a bite to eat before the first task."

The newlyweds walked back up to the castle hand in hand. For once in his life, Harry felt like fate had finally favored him and he turned his head to Hermione with the biggest smile on his face that she had ever seen him wear. The warmth and love that radiated off Harry caused her to blush and smile back at him just as intensely.

## Chapter 7: The first task.

Harry and Hermione managed to slip into the Great Hall for breakfast before most of the students were even awake. After eating a light meal, they headed up to Gryffindor Tower so Harry could change into his tournament robes that Winky had made specifically for the contest.

The robes turned out beautifully and Harry was very impressed with Winky's sewing skills. The robes were black with the gold and red colors of Gryffindor on the trim. His Quidditch number and name stitched in red with a gold border on the back. What surprised Harry was what he assumed to be the Potter Crest on the left breast pocket of his robes. The Hogwarts and Gryffindor House Crests were on his shoulders. Overall, Harry was very pleased with the new robes.

Once he was dressed he strapped his wand into the built in wand holster in the left sleeve and his potions knife went into his right. Harry may not have felt comfortable around Professor Moody but the man did have a point, "Constance Vigilance!" and he was definitely going into a very dangerous situation. Harry figured that it was better safe than sorry. When he was finished strapping on all of his gear, he headed down to the common room to meet Hermione before they headed off to the Champions Tent.

"Your robes look really good Harry." Hermione said while motioning for him to spin around so that she could see the back too.

"Thanks. Winky did a nice job on them. I've never seen the Potter Crest before." Harry said as he ran his fingers across the emblem.

"What are they made out of?" Hermione queried as she fingered the material. "It feels pretty durable. Is it heavy?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders in thought, "They are heavier than my regular Quidditch robes, but much easier to move around in." He motioned to the higher cut sides and tighter fit on the chest and shoulders to illustrate his point. Pausing for a moment as he pulled Hermione into the corner of the common room Harry called out; "Winky. Dobby."

With a twin set of pops, both elves appeared before them. They were both wearing new uniforms with the Potter Crest emblazoned on the left pocket. Dobby was also wearing a pair of mismatched socks in addition to his uniform that made Harry smile. “What can we do for you Master Harry?” asked Winky.

“These robes are great. You did a wonderful job on them. Your new uniforms look good too.” Harry said enthusiastically.

Winky blushed scarlet to the tips of her ears at the praise from her master. “Dobby helped to Master Harry.”

“Thank you Dobby.” Harry said while Dobby gave him a big smile.

Hermione sat down on the floor next to Harry and grasped his hand in hers while shooting him a shy smile. Turning back to the elves, she asked; “What kind of robes are these? Are they magical?”

“Oh yes, Miss Mione! We put many charms on them. They are dueling robes.” Harry was smiling at the elves new name for Hermione while listening to Winkys’ description. “They are spelled to be stronger than regular robes and they will keep Master Harry comfortable no matter the weather.” Winky said excitedly.

“Wow! Thank you both very much. Could you do something like this for Hermione too?”

Seeing a sheepish grin on Dobby’s face Harry knew that the elves were already a step ahead of him.

“We have already started on all of your clothes and we should be done today.” With a snap of his fingers, Dobby was holding one of Hermione’s cloaks for her. “Please Miss, this cloak is already finished.”

“Thank you, Dobby and Winky. You are both very kind to us.” Hermione said to the elves as she put on the offered cloak.

As they stood up to go they both waved goodbye to the elves while thanking them again, leaving behind two very happy Potter elves to go about their day.

Just as they were about to open the portrait hole Neville caught up to them. "Harry, Hermione! Do you mind if I walk down with you to the first task?"

"Of course, Neville. Could you also save me a seat in the stands? I want to escort Harry into the Champions Tent?"

"Sure." Neville said with a smile as the three of them chatted amiably during their trek to the enclosure for the first task.

The closer they got to the tent the more nervous and tense Harry became. By the time, they entered the tent, Harry was no longer talking, and his palms were sweating terribly. Not knowing what else to do, Hermione pulled him into his designated area of the tent. She gave him a hug while rubbing his back and whispering words of comfort in his ear. "It's okay to be nervous Harry but I know that you can do this." When she felt Harry's shoulders relax a bit she pulled back enough to give him a kiss.

Just as they were deepening the kiss there was a bright flash accompanied by the unmistakable sound of a camera taking a picture. They immediately broke apart and Harry stepped forward to place himself between Hermione and the person that had taken the photo.

Stepping towards the couple, Rita Skeeter had a sickly sweet smile on her face. "Ah, young love. And who is your little girlfriend Harry?" Her quick quotes quill was moving furiously across the notepad in her hand while she gazed hungrily at the pair of teenagers.

Before either Harry or Hermione could reply, another figure stepped in between them and Rita. To their surprise, it was Viktor Krum. "You are not welcome here. This tent is for Champions and friends." Viktor said to Rita and then he turned and gave Hermione and Harry a small smile before returning to his area of the tent, scowling at Rita Skeeter and her photographer, Bozo.

Rita's quill was moving even faster across the notepad now and Harry was dreading the article that he was sure would be in tomorrow's Daily Prophet. Before the situation could deteriorate further, Dumbledore walked into the tent followed by Barty Crouch, Ludo Bagman, Igor Karkaroff, and Madam Maxine.

Albus Dumbledore paused for a moment as he entered the tent, taking in the scene in front of him. He was not surprised to see Rita Skeeter there. What did catch him off guard was how close Harry and Hermione were standing to each other while glaring at Rita. None of this showed on his face as he strode to the middle of the room while motioning to all of the champions to join him. "Miss Granger, would you please go join your classmates. The first task will be starting shortly."

Hermione nodded in acceptance of Dumbledore's demands. She gave Harry a quick hug and a whispered message before departing. "Now then, Mr. Crouch will explain the task to everyone and then we can get started. Dumbledore said with a smile and a twinkle in his eyes.

By the time Mr. Crouch was finished with his instructions, Harry found his nervousness returning. He was going to be the final participant for the day and he had drawn the meanest dragon of the lot, the Hungarian Horntail. Trying to calm himself down, Harry focused on his bond with Hermione. He could feel her nervousness but also her strong belief that he would succeed in the task. Taking a deep breath, Harry drew strength from Hermione's belief and love in him. Albus Dumbledore had been watching Harry out of the corner of his eye when he noticed a change in his body language. The nervous stance from a few moments ago was gone and in its place was a tense, but determined posture. Turning his gaze upon Harry fully, Dumbledore noticed the robes that he was wearing. The Potter Crest was plainly visible along with the Gryffindor and Hogwarts Crests on his shoulders. He recognized the high quality dueling robes and he figured that Sirius Black had obtained them for Harry. The question was how did he get them to him? Harry had not received any packages via Owl Post that Dumbledore was aware. Nor had he met up with Remus during the last Hogsmeade weekend.

Pondering the mystery that was Harry Potter, Albus decided that he would need to keep a closer eye on the boy from now on, as he made his way out of the tent towards the judge's box.

Forty-five agonizing minutes later, it was finally Harry's turn to face a dragon. He cautiously stepped into the enclosure so as not to startle it. His first reaction upon seeing this particularly large beast was shock. This really drove home the point of how dangerous the tournament was and that someone really wanted him dead.

Shaking off his momentary shock, Harry slowly edged into the enclosure to better survey his options. He noticed that the noise from the crowd was agitating the already irritated dragon.

"Great." Harry muttered to himself. The last thing that he wanted was an irritated, nesting, dragon. He brought his wand up slowly and quietly intoned "Accio Golden Egg." Nothing happened. The egg must have been charmed against summoning. Not willing to change tactics just yet, Harry took careful aim and sent a quick "Finite Incantatem." at the golden egg.

The dragon bristled as it felt a second spell flash by her. Her protective instincts reared up and she spread her wings and roared at Harry before unleashing a huge ball of fire right at him. The speed of the fireball startled Harry so badly that he barely made it to safety by diving behind a large boulder. The flash of heat was intense, he felt like his face, and hands were sunburned. Doing his best to ignore the heat, Harry crept to another rock while staying low to the ground.

Peering around the edge of the boulder, Harry saw that the dragon was still watching the spot where he had been. Taking careful aim, he whispered "Accio Golden Egg!" To his complete surprise, the egg flew directly into his hands. Unfortunately, the Horntail's keen eyesight caught the flash of movement as the egg zoomed out of the nest.

With a roar of rage, she sent another burst of flames at the thief and began stalking towards her prey. When the fireball had dissipated, the dragon whipped her, spiked, tail towards his hiding spot.

Harry had barely managed to avoid the second blast of fire and he now realized that there was an enraged dragon between him and the exit from the enclosure. He never saw the spiked tail sweeping towards him from the side until it was too late. His shoulder exploded in pain when as he was tossed clear across the arena. Getting shakily to his feet, Harry thought that he was really in trouble now.

The dragon had murder in its eyes and it was making its way towards him. "Accio Firebolt!" Harry yelled as he began to shuffle backwards, never taking his eyes off the dragon. Fortunately for Harry the chain around the dragon's neck prevented it from coming any closer. However, its tail could still reach him and it was doing its best to smash him into a pulp.

He dove behind another rock to give him some cover from the dragon's tail. The dragon roared in fury and lunged towards his hiding place. The chain pulled taught for a second before there was a loud metallic snap. Realizing that the dragon had broken free of its bonds, Harry prepared to dart out from his now compromised position.

Just as he was about to make his mad dash, his Firebolt came zooming into the enclosure. Without missing a step, Harry jumped onto the broom and rocketed into the air as fast as his broom would go.

With another loud roar, the dragon launched itself into the air in pursuit of her prey. Harry heard the roar of the dragon and he chanced a glance behind him. Gaining on him quickly was an enraged Horntail. He knew that he could not reach the Forbidden Forrest before he the dragon caught up to him and there were no clouds in the sky for him to shake his pursuer. That meant that he had to head for the castle.

Pulling his broom into a sharp turn, Harry realized that he was more mobile but not faster than the Horntail. The dragon screeched in frustration as it shot past him. Harry put on a burst of speed and dove towards the bridge that connected the castle to the surrounding hillside.

The dragon had recovered from overshooting its mark and was diving to catch up with him. Harry briefly wondered where the dragon keepers were. He was beginning to feel the effects from the wound in his shoulder. It was getting difficult to hang onto the broom with his left hand. Blood was running down his arm and making his hand, and the broom handle, slick. Knowing that he was running out of strength fast, Harry had to end this insane chase or he would end up dead.

The stone archways of the bridge were looming in front of him and he knew that it was now or never if he wanted to survive this encounter. Pushing his Firebolt for more speed, Harry dove at the bridge, willing the dragon to follow closer. He pulled up just feet from the bridge and darted towards the castle. In his weakened state, Harry could not get the tail end of his broom level in time and it clipped the walkway. The impact knocked him off his broom head over heels.

There was a mighty crash behind him and stone flew up in every direction. The dragon had been unable to pull out of the dive and had crashed into the bridge too. It was making a horrible wailing noise as Harry pulled himself to a sitting position. Cradling his injured arm, he cautiously stood up to face the dragon.

Even though the Horntail had been trying to kill him, Harry felt sympathy for the beast. It had only been trying to protect her eggs. The dragon had two obviously broken wings and that was very bad. Harry remembered learning about Norbert from Hagrid and some other facts from the book that Moody had recommended, "Dancing with Dragons." He knew that the injuries were fatal. A dragon would not let anyone close enough to attempt to fix its wings and they were not the type of creature that could adjust to such a severe injury.

Sighing in resignation, Harry prepared himself for an unpleasant task. He could see the agony in the Dragon's eyes. It had stopped wailing and now had laid its head down on the damaged walkway, accepting its fate. It barely moved as Harry walked into its field of vision.

Pulling out his silver potions dagger, Harry set it on the ground in front of him. He gave his wand a sharp jab towards the knife and said "Engorgio." When the knife had grown to just over six feet in length and four inches in width, he canceled the spell.

Pausing a moment to gather himself; Harry looked into the dragon's eyes. Holding its gaze, Harry said, "I'm so sorry."

With a quick swish and flick of his wand, he levitated the knife turned sword above the dragons head. Harry hesitated for a moment before he made a quick slashing movement straight down, banishing the blade as hard as he could directly at the dragons head. The sound of the blade piercing the dragon's skull and driving deep into the stone was like a physical blow to Harry.

He sank to his knees in front of the dead beasts face. Sobbing, Harry cried out in a strangled voice, "I'm so sorry." before slinking into unconsciousness from his injuries and exhaustion. He awoke a short time later lying in a puddle of blood, his own and the dragons. Struggling into a sitting position, he began to take stock of his situation.

Harry knew that he needed medical attention soon. His shoulder was still bleeding and he was sure that he had some other injures as well. Summoning his broom to him, he climbed on and took off towards the Champions Tent.

As he crested, the hill and the stands came into view he realized that someone must have spotted him because he could hear the noise from the crowd getting louder. Harry landed roughly next to the Champions Tent where he met Madam Poppy Pomfrey, Professor McGonagall, Albus Dumbledore, and the rest of the judges. Looking around the gathering crowd he croaked out; "Where's Hermione?" before he collapsed into a heap at their feet.

The teachers were shocked at Harry's appearance. He was covered in blood, and not all of it his own. Professor McGonagall's stern façade cracked as Harry collapsed. Madam Poppy Pomfrey immediately began checking over his injuries.

With a quick flick of her wrist, Minerva McGonagall conjured some privacy screens around them. Assuring herself that Madam Poppy Pomfrey had things under control, she swept out of the enclosure to

locate Ms. Granger, only to see her running towards her with tears in her eyes and Remus Lupin not far behind.

Hermione had been a nervous wreck when Harry had flown off with the dragon in hot pursuit. She was furious when the dragon handlers were unprepared. They did not have any brooms standing by to pursue the dragon. Her worries grew the longer Harry was gone. When she saw him flying towards the Champions Tent she felt a wave of relief wash through her. That quickly turned to fear when Harry collapsed upon his return. Breaking into a run, she headed towards him as fast as she could, hoping that he would be all right.

Professor McGonagall moved to intercept the obviously upset witch. "Ms. Granger." She called out while stepping directly into Hermione's path. She was completely surprised when Hermione did not even slow down, she just ran around her and into the screened off area where Harry was being treated. Before she could turn around Remus Lupin was standing in front of her motioning into the enclosure. "Remus?" she asked in surprise.

"I'm going in Minerva." Remus said as he stepped by, leaving her to follow him inside.

Hermione paled at the scene in front of her. Harry was unconscious and covered in blood. Madam Poppy Pomfrey was pouring potions into the wound on his shoulder while muttering a healing charm. Hermione was hugging herself and rocking back and forth while Professor Dumbledore looked on in silence.

Remus stepped up to Hermione and pulled her into a hug. She flinched at the initial contact in surprise before breaking down in silent sobs in his arms, never taking her eyes off Harry's prone form.

Madam Poppy Pomfrey was working as fast as she could on Harry's wound. He had lost a lot of blood and his shoulder was dislocated. She would worry about the joint once she had Mr. Potter out of immediate danger. The potion was making the wound hiss and pop as it cleaned out the debris. While the potion was doing its job, she began pouring a blood restorative potion down his throat. Satisfied that the potion was working she turned her attention back to the still

bleeding gash. When the cleansing potion was finished working Poppy began closing the wound. Mr. Potter was going to have a large scar to remember this task afterwards. Wounds from a dragon were magical and very hard to heal without scarring.

Not as happy as she could have been with the results, there was a long ropey purple scar on his left shoulder; at least the wound had closed. With a sigh, she turned her attention to the dislocated joint. With a wave of her wand, there was a loud snap as Mr. Potter's shoulder popped back into place.

Taking a moment to survey the unconscious boy in front of her, Poppy Pomfrey sighed in relief. Harry had lost a lot of blood but he would pull through just fine. Turning to face Professor Dumbledore, she was surprised to see Remus Lupin and Hermione Granger standing next to Minerva. "He is going to be fine. He will be a bit sore for a few days and should take it easy. I'm ready to move him to the hospital wing now."

Hermione stepped forward and grasped Harry's right hand while he was being levitated onto a stretcher. She was silent during the walk up to the castle, never letting go of his hand. When they had neared the stands, the reporters were shouting questions out to Madam Poppy Pomfrey and Professor Dumbledore. Ignoring the reporters, Hermione noticed that the headmaster stayed behind to answer some of their questions while Remus followed them up to the castle looking relieved.

Once Harry was on a bed, Madam Poppy Pomfrey cleaned him up and dressed him in a fresh gown. Harry was still a bit pale but the color was slowly returning to his face. Hermione took a seat in the chair adjacent to Harry's bed and laid her head down next to his right hand and began to cry as her emotions finally caught up to her.

She must have fallen asleep because she awoke to a hand stroking her hair. Look up she felt a wave of relief flow through her as she realized that it was Harry running his fingers through her hair. "Harry?" Hermione called with a hitch in her voice.

With a nod and a small smile, Harry motioned with his good arm for her to give him a hug. Feeling Hermione shaking while she hugged him, he gently rubbed her back until she was able to compose herself. "Hey. Its okay; Hermione. It's over now." Harry said softly.

She leaned back grasping his hand again and gave him a watery smile. "I was so scared when the dragon broke free and chased after you. What happened?"

Before Harry could answer her question, Albus Dumbledore strode up to them and said, "Indeed, Miss Granger. We are all wondering the same thing."

Harry gazed up at Dumbledore, annoyed that he had interrupted his time with Hermione. However, he also understood that he would have to give the headmaster an explanation eventually. With an audible sigh, Harry began retelling the details of his ordeal.

Dumbledore remained quiet while Harry recounted his adventure. He noticed that Harry held onto Miss Granger's hand and that she would occasionally rub his forearm during a difficult part of his story. "What happened to the dragon Harry?" Dumbledore asked. He knew that the dragon was dead but he wanted the details of how.

Harry looked to Hermione and she gave his hand a reassuring squeeze while pushing feelings of love and support through their bond. He gave her a brief smile and turned his attention back to the headmaster. "It's dead sir." Harry stated in a flat tone of voice.

Hermione, Remus, and Madam Poppy Pomfrey all gasped but Dumbledore nodded his head as if confirming a fact. "And how did the dragon die Harry?" his tone of voice held a hint of regret at the loss of life.

Harry was annoyed and sympathetic with Dumbledore at the same time. He understood that a magnificent beast had died, by his own hand even, but he was slightly angry because it felt like the headmaster was accusing him of killing the dragon for no good reason.

"I didn't have a choice sir." Harry said with a hint of regret tinged with annoyance in his voice.

"There is always a choice Harry. Why didn't you just run away?" Dumbledore pressed.

Hermione felt the flash of outrage, fury, and disbelief come from Harry. His face only showed a look of regret but she knew that Harry really did not want to slay the dragon at all. Before she could say anything to the headmaster in his defense, Remus Lupin spoke up.

"Albus! Harry's health is our main concern here, not why he did not run away. Did it ever occur to you that maybe Harry didn't really have any other choice?" Remus said in a slightly enraged tone.

Harry and Hermione each gave Remus a small nod of thanks before turning their attention back to the exasperating headmaster.

"Remus, you know that there are always choices and this situation is no different. Mr. Potter could have spared the dragons life instead of taking the easy path." Dumbledore spoke with a slightly holier than thou attitude.

"EASY!" Harry roared, sitting up straight in the hospital bed glaring in disbelief at the old man in front of him. "That was the hardest thing that I have ever had to do in my life! The dragon was dying in front of me. Both of its wings were badly broken from crashing into the bridge. She was keening in pain and in the end she just put her head down on the ground and whimpered."

Harry paused to wipe away the tears that had come unbidden to his eyes. Continuing in a voice just above a whisper Harry said, "I did it to end her suffering. She was only protecting her eggs for your stupid tournament! Do you even care that I almost died or are you more worried about the fact that I had to kill the dragon?"

Exhausted, Harry sunk back into the bed and turned away from Dumbledore. Silent sobs wracking his body. Hermione shot the headmaster a furious glare before pulling Harry into a loving hug.

"Perhaps you should leave, Albus." Minerva McGonagall said from behind everyone. She had entered the hospital wing in time to hear Remus rebuke her superior. She was a little bit appalled at Albus' behavior towards Mr. Potter since this entire fiasco of a tournament began.

With a sigh, Albus Dumbledore nodded to the professor and swept out of the hospital wing, closing the doors behind him as he left.

## Chapter 8: The parting.

"Mr. Potter, are you feeling better?" asked Minerva once she had seated herself in the newly vacated chair. She saw him nod his head yes, so she felt that it was safe to continue. "Do you want to know your scores from the task or would you like to rest for a while?"

Harry whispered something to Hermione before sitting up to face his Head of House. "Not really, but you may as well tell me how everyone did. However, can you tell me what will happen to the dragon's body first?"

"I believe that Charlie Weasley is taking care of the arrangements and he mentioned needing to ask you something about that before he leaves. You are currently in second place in the tournament just behind Mr. Diggory. Even though you completed the task first, some of the judges felt that you didn't deserve full marks because you were injured." Professor McGonagall spoke softly with a hint of displeasure towards the judges in her voice.

"Thank you, professor. Is that all?" Harry said to her while nodding towards the door where Dumbledore had just exited through.

Professor McGonagall understood both of his meanings. Feeling that her business was finished here, she rose from her chair to head back to the Gryffindor Tower to let everyone know that Harry would be all right. "You're welcome Harry. Remus, Hermione; take all the time you need in here. I'll inform Madam Poppy Pomfrey that you are allowed to be here Hermione."

"Thank you, professor." Hermione replied from her spot on Harry's bed.

Remus got up and patted Harry's foot before following his former co-worker the nurse's office for a chat.

Hermione turned to face Harry on the bed and looked into his eyes. She could see how tired he was but she also noticed the sadness in his eyes. The first task had required much more than just bravery and quick thinking for him. It had cost Harry more of his innocence as well.

She reached a hand up and cupped his cheek while looking into his eyes. "I'm so proud of you Harry. You did the right thing. No animal deserves to suffer like that." She leaned in and planted a soft kiss on his mouth.

Misty eyed, Harry smiled at her and said; "Thank you."

They looked up at the sound of the doors to the hospital wing opening and they noticed a young, stocky but muscular, man with a shock of red hair striding towards them with a somber look on his face.

Charlie Weasley had heard about Harry Potter from his family. He knew that the young witch holding his hand must be Hermione Granger. Reaching out his hand to them, he said, "I'm Charlie Weasley. It's a pleasure to finally meet you both."

The first thing that came to Harry's mind when he shook Charlie's hand was that he took after Mr. Weasley in his temperament. Charlie's voice was a bit softer than he would have thought but it was flush with the assurances of a man at peace with his life. Harry shortly wondered if he would ever sound like that.

"Hello Charlie. This is my girlfriend, Hermione Granger. Thank you for coming to visit."

Hermione smiled at Charlie, and at Harry's introduction. "Pleased to meet you too Charlie. What can we do for you?"

Charlie hid his surprise at finding out about Harry and Hermione's relationship. He had thought that Ron and Hermione liked each other. Oh, well, he thought, he would figure that out later. "I came to talk with you about the dragon's remains and to apologize for not being better prepared when the Horntail got loose and attacked you."

Harry was not expecting this turn of events. 'What were you supposed to do with a dead dragon?' he thought. Turning to Hermione he said, "Could you ask Remus to join us please?"

With a nod yes, she got up from her perch on Harry's bed and went to fetch Remus. Her mind was trying to figure out why Charlie would be asking Harry about the Dragon's remains. Knocking on Madam Poppy Pomfreys door she asked "Mr. Lupin, Harry has a question that he needs you help with."

A flicker of comprehension appeared on Lupin's face before he excused himself and followed Hermione back to where Harry and Charlie were talking. "What can I help you with Harry?"

"Well, Charlie says that the Dragon Preserve is offering me the Horntail's remains as an apology for not being better prepared to help me."

Charlie nodded in the affirmative to Harry's statement while Remus' face had a look of deep thought. "Charlie, can your crew process the remains for anything useful?" Remus asked.

"We have already started doing that." Charlie replied.

Remus thought for a moment before formulating his next question. "Is there any part of the dragon that you need at the reservation?" He knew how valuable a dead dragon could be and how large of a gift that Harry was really being given, even if Harry did not fully grasp the situation.

"We could use some of the meat and blood. We already have plenty of hide in storage so that is all Harry's." Charlie said earnestly.

Remus turned to Harry and smiled as he spoke "Harry, dragon remains are very valuable. Almost every part of the dragon has some use in the magical world. Everything from potions ingredients, clothing, wand cores, and food, are worth harvesting from a dragon. Letting Charlie have most of the meat and about a third of the blood would more than cover the costs of processing everything for you."

"Okay. I can accept that. Is that alright with you Charlie?" Harry asked.

"Of course. That is more than enough. Thank you very much." Charlie said as his insides were dancing a jig as he thought 'The extra money

from selling the blood and meat would really help. I may even have enough afterwards to finally be able to buy a home off of the preserve.'

"Do you mind handling everything else Remus? I don't think that I can really store any of those items here at school." Harry asked his pseudo uncle.

"Absolutely. I will make sure that everything is stored appropriately for you Harry. Charlie, I'll meet you down there in a bit." Remus said as he got up to hug Harry before heading out to prepare to move the dragon's remains. Whispering into Harry's ear he said, "Sirius and I are very proud of you. You did the right thing so don't let others tell you different. We'll store all of your proceeds at Padfoots for you."

Harry was a little misty eyed so he just nodded to Remus in thanks. Turning to face Charlie, he was surprised to see the redhead pulling out his potions knife.

"I thought that you might want this back." Charlie said simply while extending the blade to Harry hilt first.

"Thanks." Harry said after taking the knife and placing it on the nightstand next to his wand.

"That was a really good bit of transfiguration Harry. I'm glad that Ron told you about the dragons and that you were able to prepare yourself." Charlie said earnestly.

Unfortunately, Ron chose that exact moment to enter the hospital wing to apologize to Harry. "Hi Mate!" Ron said jovially as he walked up to Harry's hospital bed.

Before Ron could get another word out of his mouth Hermione exploded; "You knew about the dragons and you didn't say anything to Harry? How could you?"

Charlie was shocked and his confusion was evident on his face. When Ron made no move to deny the accusation, his expression turned grim. 'This is not going to end well.' Charlie thought.

"Well, it's not like Harry needed any help. He did just fine on his own. Right, Mate?" Ron said simply, proving just how thick he really was.

Faster than anyone realized she could move, Hermione stood up and slapped Ron as hard as she could while crying, "He could have died!" Tears were flowing silently down her cheeks in her rage.

Ron staggered backwards into Charlie from the force of the blow. His cheek already had a handprint that was turning an angry shade of red.

Charlie grabbed Ron, steadied him with a grip on his upper arms, and gently pulled him away from Hermione. He could see the tell tale signs of a Weasley meltdown by the red on the tips of Ron's ears.

Harry was furious. He realized that Ron had wanted him to fail so he could feel better about himself. In his anger, he did not notice the glass vials on the nightstand exploding. Harry looked at Ron and in a voice absolutely devoid of warmth he said, "Get out."

Madam Poppy Pomfrey had just stepped out of her office as Hermione slapped Ron. She was moving quickly to intervene when the glass vials near Harry exploded, stopping her in her tracks. The cold tone of his voice shocked her as she heard Mr. Potter order Ron Weasley out of the hospital wing.

Ron angrily pulled his arms out of his older brother's grasp and took a menacing step towards Hermione. He was so angry that he didn't even register what Harry had said to him.

Hermione recognized the look in Ron's eyes and she hastily stepped back while trying to pull her wand from her robes. Before she could bring her wand to bear, Ron's arm was already swinging towards her face. She steeled herself for the blow that she knew she could not avoid.

When Ron raised his arm towards Hermione, something in Harry snapped. His wand was suddenly in his hand and with a quick jab towards Ron; he banished him the length of the hospital wing. He only stopped flying through the air because he collided with the

closed doors. With another flick of his wrist, Harry had Ron immobilized and summoned his wand into his open hand. Without pausing in his stride, he snapped Ron's wand and threw it contemptuously over his shoulder. Power was radiating from Harry and everyone in the hospital wing could feel it washing over them.

The power rolling off Harry surprised Madam Pomfrey too much for her to intervene on Ron's behalf. Her own wand hung limply from her fingers, as she stood transfixed to the spectacle unfolding in front of her.

Charlie was scrambling out of the chair that Ron had knocked him into when he felt the power of Harry's silent banishing charm fly past. He had never felt a spell with that much power before. In his daze, Charlie missed his chance to grab Harry as he swept by. He knew that Harry was a powerful wizard, killing a dragon was no easy feat, but when he felt the wave of Harry's magic wash over him he wondered 'Just how powerful was the Boy-Who-Lived.' His musings were cut short when he saw Harry lazily summon Ron's wand, and then snap it without a second thought. His earlier prediction that this would not end well was quickly coming true.

Hermione was in shock when she realized that Ron was going to hit her. Caught unprepared, she could not get her wand out of its holder in defense. As she prepared herself for the blow, she was surprised when it didn't come.

Then she felt it, Harry's emotions exploded through their bond. His anger was so great that it was almost suffocating. She never heard an incantation but she knew that Harry had stopped Ron from hitting her.

## Chapter 9: Repercussions

Ron was dazed, lying in a heap against the hospital wing doors. Before he could get up, he felt his wand sail out of his robes. His anger returned as he watched Harry casually destroy his wand and toss the pieces away without a second thought. He discovered that he could no longer move when he went to confront Harry. Ron couldn't remember hearing an incantation at all but he was distracted from that thought when he felt the magic rolling off Harry in waves as he approached.

Stopping just a foot away from Ron, Harry knelt down so that they were face to face. In a voice that was so quiet, Ron had to strain to hear it, Harry said, "If you ever raise your hand, or wand, towards Hermione again you will wish that you were never born."

Harry stood back up, began pooling his magic, and then fired the most powerful stunner he could manage right between Ron's eyes before removing the binding charm. He watched Ron's unconscious body crumple to the floor with a look of disappointment and disgust on his face.

No one moved as Harry walked up to Hermione, concern clearly visible on his face. "Are you okay?" he asked as he pulled her into his chest with his good arm. He felt her nod yes, so he turned his attention to Charlie who was still sitting in a chair, shock plainly visible on his face.

"I'm sorry that you had to see that. Ron never mentioned anything about the first task. In fact, we haven't spoken to each other since late October." Harry said with a hint of regret in his voice.

Charlie was surprised to hear that Ron was not speaking to Harry or Hermione. "I didn't know that you two weren't speaking with each other. If I had known, I would have sent you an owl or something."

Glancing over at Rons' crumpled form Charlie sighed in resignation before speaking again. "I'm sorry for how Ron behaved earlier Hermione. He should have known better. I'll speak to him when he wakes up and I will make sure that mum, dad, and Professor

McGonagall know what happened.” Charlie waved goodbye and he got up to lead the still shocked Madam Poppy Pomfrey back to her office to talk about what they had just witnessed.

Harry looked over at Hermione and asked, “Can you get me a fresh set of clothes or just transfigure what I’m wearing so we can leave please?”

“Of course.” Hermione said as she stepped over to the bathroom and called “Dobby.” The small elf popped into the room in front of her and once he saw her she smiled at him and spoke “Dobby. Would you please bring some fresh clothes for Harry?”

“I would be happy to Miss Mione.” Dobby said in his high-pitched voice as he popped out of the room.

Before Hermione could even leave the room, Dobby was back with the clothing in his arms. She took them from him and set them down on the sink. “Thank you Dobby.”

“You’re welcome.” Dobby smiled and popped away thinking about how happy he was being in service to the Potters and leaving a slightly bewildered Hermione in his wake.

She knew that something was different about Dobby and Winky the past couple of weeks but she had not quite put her finger on it yet. Pushing that thought out of her mind, she called Harry over to the bathroom so he could change. “I’ll be right outside if you need anything.”

“Thanks.” Harry said as he stepped into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. He quickly realized that he couldn’t use his left arm enough to get completely dressed and he was not confident enough that he could pull off a proper switching spell at the moment.

Making sure he was as presentable as possible, Harry opened the door and stuck his head out. “Uh; Hermione? Could you give me a hand please?” he said with a slight blush on his cheeks.

Hermione got up from her chair and headed over to see what Harry needed help with. When she opened the door to the loo, the sight that greeted her caused her to blush scarlet.

Harry was standing there with his shirt only half on and his pants unbuttoned. The blush on his face was threatening to move down to his chest he was so pink. She had seen boys in their swim trunks before but somehow seeing Harry standing there, half dressed, affected her in ways that she hadn't thought about before. Her blush almost matched Harry's when she realized why he had called her into the bathroom.

Silently she stepped up to Harry without saying a word and began fastening the buttons on his clothes. Hermione couldn't help but admire Harry's developing physique as she was finishing up with the buttons on his shirt.

When she was finished helping him dress she left her hands on his chest and put her head on his good shoulder. His skin was warm, and soft, to the touch. Oddly enough, she found that she enjoyed dressing Harry. It was innocent, yet very intimate, and it brought forth a feeling of contentment inside of her.

Harry was trying hard to control his breathing while Hermione was buttoning his shirt. His heart was pounding so hard that he was sure she must have felt it when her fingers brushed against his chest. What he didn't realize was that her heart was fluttering just as much as his was pounding.

With his good arm, he reached up and rubbed her back in thanks, enjoying the quiet, intimate, moment. He hoped that there would be many more of these moments in their future.

Harry had never given much thought to his future before. He was only fourteen and it had seemed so far off. The realization of their bonding began to settle upon him as the days events receded into the background.

The first task had been consuming him and now he understood why Hermione had a slight panic attack earlier in the day. Their futures

were tied together in ways that he just could not comprehend completely yet.

Hermione pulled back from Harry's embrace and gave him a small smile. Looping her arm around his waist she said, "Let's head down to the kitchens. You must be starving, and we could use a quiet place to talk."

On cue, Harry's stomach gave a low gurgle and Hermione had to stifle a giggle. However, her stomach decided that food was a good thing too and made a similar noise causing Harry to raise an eyebrow in mock questioning as he laughed along with her.

Harry paused at the entryway, noticing that Ron was no longer lying on the floor. He looked around and saw him on one of the beds farthest away from the door, still unconscious.

Hermione saw Harry's face take on a look of disappointment when he gazed upon Ron. Sensing his discomfort, she said, "Come on. I'm hungry too and he is going to be fine. Madam Poppy Pomfrey said that he should wake in a few hours."

When they reached the portrait of fruit, Hermione tickled the pear to gain entrance to the kitchens. Stepping into the room, they met their two elves. Dobby and Winky ushered them over to a table in the corner and proceeded to bring them the meal that they had been planning for them.

While Harry and Hermione were having a nice meal in the kitchens, Albus Dumbledore was pacing around his office, deep in thought.

Events were unfolding around Harry Potter differently, and much sooner, than he had planned. The Death Eaters were up to something, Dumbledore was sure that one of them had entered Harry into the tournament somehow. It was trying to figure out what they gained by having him in the tournament that troubled him. 'Was it Harry's death or something else that they wanted?' He thought to himself ruefully.

Harry was also another cause for concern. The events of the first task troubled him deeply. 'Was Harry traveling down the same path as Tom Riddle before him?' They had similar backgrounds but there had always been a sense of innocence and wonder around Harry that Tom had always lacked. Now he feared that those traits were leaving Harry and the new ones were very troubling.

Taking a life should always be a last resort in Albus' mind. Harry had now added another body to his count and he did not seem too bothered by it. He did not fault Harry for the basilisk, they were horrible creatures and not easily controlled.

Quirell's death saddened him because he felt that he could have saved him from possession by Voldemort. The damage that Harry had done to Quirell's body had been so severe that it destroyed any chance for survival when the pain forced the spirit of Voldemort out.

Albus had never forgiven himself for the death of his younger sister, Ariana. That was why he refused to kill, even in self-defense, and why Harry's actions troubled him so much. After all, his defeat of Grindewald was proof that you could defeat a dark wizard without resorting to killing. Grindewald was in Germany, incarcerated at Nurmengard, serving a life sentence since his capture at Dumbledore's hands.

Because of his capture of Grindewald, Dumbledore never considered that putting people in Azkaban for life was worse than killing someone instead. Yes, he knew that Dementors drove the inmates insane and eventually led to a slow and agonizing death but he put that out of his mind.

He had ordered others on missions where he knew that they would have to kill. As long as he did not perform the deed, it allowed him the illusion that his hands were clean.

Dumbledore, and the majority of the Wizarding world, felt that Azkaban was the best solution for dealing with hardened criminals and it allowed them to feel no guilt for the fate of the prisoners.

Sometimes ending a life was the better choice, but it was never the easier one. Not everyone was worth redeeming.

Dumbledore stopped his pacing in front of the shelf of silver instruments. Everyone assumed that the relics were from his long life. What they did not realize was that each one tied to Harry Potter in some fashion. They monitored his location, health, magic use, and the wards at his aunt and uncles house.

He frowned when he noticed that the orb tied to the wards at Privet Drive was spinning slower than usual. With a shrug of someone used to getting their way, Dumbledore decided that Harry would have to stay there longer during the summer in order to recharge them.

The orb showing Harry's health was also returning to its normal machinations. Which meant Harry was quickly recovering from his encounter with the dragon.

What Dumbledore failed to notice was that the device tied to Harry's magic use was no longer functioning properly. It still emitted small puffs of smoke from time to time but the spells cast no longer registered. In fact, since Harry and Hermione bonded it had not reported anything. Further complicating matters for Dumbledore was that the trace had also broken on the two teens, further removing them from his influence.

Just as Albus was settling back into his desk chair one of the portraits spoke up, interrupting his reverie. "Excuse me Headmaster." Once Dumbledore found the correct portrait on the wall, it continued speaking to him. "There was an altercation in the hospital wing between a Mr. Harry Potter and Mr. Ronald Weasley about an hour ago. I only just heard about it from one of the other portraits as I was passing through."

"What happened?"

"The other portrait didn't see the entire encounter because she was not in her frame when it started. She saw Mr. Potter raise his wand and banish Mr. Weasley into the hospital wing doors, bind him, summon his wand and snap it before approaching him while he was

on the ground. Mr. Potter whispered something to Mr. Weasley and then stunned him and walked away." The portrait of the former headmistress said importantly.

"Very well, see if you can discover what caused the altercation. From now on, I want at least one portrait occupied at all times in all of the main areas of the castle. Keep tabs on Mr. Potter and if he does anything suspicious please let me know right away." Dumbledore sighed in resignation.

This new development was not good in the headmaster's mind. Snapping the wand of another wizard was tantamount to saying that you felt that he, or she, was not worthy enough to practice magic. If this was Harry's new viewpoint towards his friends what did that say of how he would treat someone that he considered an enemy?

Leaning back in his high backed chair, Dumbledore removed his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his, long, crooked nose trying to stem the headache that Harry Potter caused. He had taken extreme care in molding Harry to ensure that he would sacrifice himself for others in order to fulfill the prophecy. Things were spiraling out of control and his carefully laid plans were unraveling bit by bit, as Harry traveled down a darker path.

Fortunately, Albus Dumbledore learned the value of manipulation, keeping secrets, and planning for multiple events at a young age. There were other ways to ensure that Harry Potter fulfilled the prophecy and now he had to begin setting them in motion. 'A kind word here, a veiled threat there, and the promises of aid in the future would get the ball rolling nicely.' he thought to himself as he went over the myriad of schemes he was going to employ.

The morning after the first task did nothing to improve Harry's mood, which darkened considerably with the delivery of the Daily Prophet. Whispers were breaking out all over the Great Hall and people began pointing and staring at Harry and Hermione.

Harry pulled a copy of the Prophet towards him and his arm froze when he saw a picture of him and Hermione kissing on the front page with the headline 'Harry Potters Heartache.' He groaned when he

read the title and realized that Rita Skeeter, his least favorite reporter, wrote it.

He actually laughed aloud when he read the part about him being a glory seeking, no talent, wizard. When he got to the part where the article declared Hermione a, ‘plain but ambitious muggle born witch’ that was dosing him with a love potion to make Viktor Krum jealous he became enraged. The article presented Hermione in the worst light possible and there were some nasty quotes from some of their Slytherin year mates thrown in to make it look even worse.

Abruptly Harry stood up, snatched his copy of the Daily Prophet, and marched up to the head table. All talking in the Great Hall stopped as everyone noticed, an obviously, angry Harry Potter slam the paper down on the table in front of the Headmaster and hiss out “What are you going to do about this?”

All of the teachers, and students were shocked at Harry’s actions. Albus Dumbledore just leaned back in his chair and folded his hands in front of his chest, his eyes twinkling as he gazed upon Harry.

After a few tense seconds where student stared at headmaster, Albus finally spoke. “What would you have me do Mr. Potter?”

Hermione knew that Harry was close to loosing it in front of the entire Great Hall and she feared that the Headmaster’s words were going to push him over the edge. Trying to head off the explosion, she pushed her feelings of love and calm through the bond to him.

Harry was about to retort when Hermione’s emotions flowed through their bond. He snapped his mouth shut before turning around and pulling his wand out. Pointing it directly at Draco Malfoy, he said “Accio button.”

There was a ripping sound as the button tore itself free from Malfoys robes and flew into Harry’s outstretched hand.

Returning his attention back to the headmaster, he flipped the offending button onto the table next to the paper. He pressed the button and the message shifted to read, “Potter Stinks!” Seeing no

reaction from Dumbledore at all, Harry said, “I expect you will do the same thing as when Malfoy began distributing these buttons throughout the school. Which is absolutely nothing.”

As he turned around Harry called out over his shoulder, “Have a good day Headmaster.” He began walking out of the Great Hall, furious with Dumbledore and slightly angry with himself for loosing his temper in such a public place.

Just as Harry approached the doors, Hermione caught up with him. Before they could leave Professor Snape yelled out; “Potter! Detention for a week and one hundred points from Gryffindor for your disrespect!”

Harry paused and looked back up at the staff table. He noticed that Professor McGonagall was turning red, Snape was smirking at him, Dumbledore had a calculating look on his face, and the rest of the teachers, and people in the Great Hall looked shocked. He nodded in acceptance of his punishment and left the Great Hall with Hermione by his side.

Minerva McGonagall realized that she had her opportunity to help Harry with one of his problems in such a way that Albus could not interfere without undermining the teachers authority. She stood up from her chair and walked to the front of the raised platform where the headmaster gave his opening feast speech. She gazed at each of the house tables, counting the number of people wearing the buttons before coming to a decision.

“May I have your attention please?” she called out, but everyone knew that it was a command, not a request. “When I point to you please stand up and remain standing until I say that you may sit down.”

Albus Dumbledore hid a frown when he realized what Professor McGonagall was about to do and there was nothing that he could do to prevent it.

When Professor McGonagall was finished pointing she realized that about half of the student body was now standing. The majority of the

students were fourth years and above with the odd first, second, or third year thrown in.

"Everyone standing has just cost their house 10 points each and has earned themselves a weeks worth of detentions! You should all be ashamed of the way you have comported yourselves. Remain after the feast so that I may assign your detentions. Anyone caught wearing that infernal button after today will cost their house twenty-five points, earn a week of detentions, and have your Hogsmeade privileges suspended for the remainder of the fall term. You may be seated."

Harry and Hermione headed down towards the dungeons for their first lesson of the day, potions. He knew that he was in for a rough time in Snapes class after the display in the Great Hall. Two hours, twenty points and one vanished potion later, Harry finally left the potions classroom in a very bad mood.

The lesson had passed quietly until Professor Snape proceeded to vanish his potion. It had been a pale shade of blue instead of the royal blue that it was supposed to be according to their textbooks. When Harry had pointed out that Crabbe, Goyle's potions were orange, and making a hissing noise, Snape deducted twenty points for "his cheek."

Harry was having a hard time getting his emotions back under control after Snapes blatant goading. When they ran into Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle on their way to Charms Hermione feared that things would get violent. She was surprised when the exact opposite happened.

""You're going to pay for those robes Potter. They were brand new and you ruined them." Malfoy said with obvious annoyance in his voice.

Harry gazed blankly at Malfoy for a few seconds then said, "Okay." before turning around and resuming his trek up to the Charms Corridor with Hermione.

Malfoy was lost in thought, confused, while watching Potter and his Mudblood walk away. He had expected Potter to snap at, or even

curse, him after the way Snape treated him during class. The almost emotionless look on Potter's face as he looked at him was a bit disturbing and the complete lack of a physical response out of character for him.

"Come on, let's get to class." Draco said absent-mindedly to his two companions. His mind was still firmly working on what he could do to get under the skin of Potter.

Hermione had been silent since the end of potions class and the encounter with Malfoy. She had been thinking about Professor Snapes behavior towards Harry as it was really bothering her. The result of a teacher acting like that in a non-magical school would have been discipline or dismissal. Snapes behavior towards Harry had only gotten worse since their first year. Hermione resolved to talk to Professor McGonagall about the matter later since she was sure that the Headmaster would not do a thing.

Charms class turned out to be just what the two of them needed. Professor Flitwick was teaching summoning and banishing charms today and they had already learned in preparation for the first task. As a result, Harry earned ten points for his summoning charm and Hermione won another ten for Gryffindor with the accuracy of her banishing charm.

They had a peaceful lunch in the courtyard of the castle, courtesy of Winky, to avoid the stares and whispers of their classmates. When they were finished with their lunch Harry asked Hermione "Do you want to take a walk down to the lake since we have a free period?"

"I think that's a good idea. It's pretty nice out today and there aren't going to be many days like this anymore." Hermione replied.

Harry wasn't completely sure if she was talking about the weather or the events surrounding the tournament but he knew that he needed to spend some more time away from the rest of the student body and that Hermione understood this fact.

The snow was not very deep but the air was crisp and the sky a brilliant shade of blue as they headed for their spot by the shore.

When they arrived, Harry pulled out his wand and pointed it at their boulder, a look of concentration on his face.

After a few seconds, the tip of Harry's wand emitted a bluish glow. As he directed it towards the boulder in a left to right pattern and parts of it turned to dust. A few more passes the dust began to settle and the very distinct outline of a bench seat appeared, carved into the stone.

A quick cleaning charm, a cushioning charm, and a heating spell later the couple was sitting side by side looking out at the lake.

Hermione conjured a blanket fort their legs and she leaned into Harry's side. "That was pretty impressive spell work Harry."

"Thanks. I figured that this would be nicer than sitting on the boulder itself. I will put up a few notice-me-not spells before we go. I like having a space that we can call our own out here."

"That sounds lovely." Hermione said as she smiled at him.

After sitting by the lake for half an hour in companionable silence, Harry helped Hermione to her feet. "I guess we should head up to the castle now. We wouldn't want to be late for transfiguration."

The two teens walked hand in hand up to the castle, the grounds blanketed in a fresh layer of snow that had fallen overnight, their thoughts on each other and what their future may hold.

## Chapter 10: Moving Day.

Remus and Sirius were busy in the basement of Number Twelve storing the dragon parts that Charlie's team had harvested for Harry.

As they were placing the last of the hide on a shelf Sirius muttered, "How big was this thing?"

Lupin paused a moment, calculating the beast's size; "I think it was around twenty meters long snout to tail. It was a full grown, nesting, mother dragon and the largest any of the champions had to face."

Sirius shook his head side to side in dismay as he thought 'Why Harry?' Looking back at Remus, he asked, "Do you think we could have some protective clothing made for Harry using the hide?"

"Sure, Winky made a really good set of tournament robes for Harry so I'm sure that she could whip up something for him." Remus said while fingering the rough hide.

"Winky!" Sirius called out to the elf.

She appeared with a small pop and an eager look upon her face. "What can I do for you today?"

"Would you be able to make Harry and Hermione some protective clothing from this dragon hide?" Sirius asked the little elf.

"Of course. Winky will get started right away!" With another small pop she was gone, off to collect some materials and tools needed for her work.

Smiling at Winky's enthusiasm, Remus and Sirius headed up to the kitchens to grab some lunch and to discuss the Grangers new house and the protections that they were going to put in place later that evening.

John and Annabelle Granger had been quietly changing all of their business and personal affairs. They had arranged to have all mail sent to a service that would then forward things appropriately. A

business manager had also helped set up their new practice. He used multiple corporations and business entities to further protect them from discovery.

They were sad to close their business and sell their home but the Grangers were also very practical people. They knew that Professor Dumbledore and the Death Eaters would do everything that they could to locate Harry Potter.

With those thoughts on her mind, Annabelle turned to her husband and asked, "Is it going to be enough?"

John knew what his wife meant because he was having some of the same fears. "I hope so. Remus said that he would come by the new house tonight and place the wards and any other protections that they could think of. Once he is finished, he will bring us their and then we can complete the sale of this one."

Annabelle came over, hugged her husband of twenty years, and settled into his embrace. "I'm going to miss this house. There are so many good memories here."

Gently rubbing her back he replied "Yes, there are; but we will make some new ones and hopefully provide Harry with a few as well."

They were startled out of there reverie by a small pop in front of them. Dobby had appeared with two large trunks.

"Hello, Dobby." Said the Granger's to the smiling elf. They had grown fond of Winky and Dobby once they had gotten over their initial shock. Now they were very thankful for all of their help.

"Hello. Dobby is here to inspect and pack your belongings."

Annabelle kneeled down to inspect the trunks and then looked up at Dobby. "Aren't you going to need more trunks?"

"Oh no, Miss." Dobby giggled. "These trunks are much bigger on the inside." Dobby said as he opened one of the trunks so that the

Grangers could peer inside. "These trunks will hold all of your belongings. The furniture will be moved separately."

"Thank you Dobby. If you need any help please ask." Annabelle said as she stood back up shaking her head at the feats, that Magic was capable of.

"Will you and Winky have time to stop by after you are finished moving our things?" Annabelle asked the small elf. She had been teaching the elves proper English since she had met them. Surprisingly, the elves lessons in English Grammar had turned into Magical Culture lessons for the Grangers. They were able to gain some valuable insight into the magical community while getting to know Harry's elves.

"Dobby and Winky will be there later this evening. We are really enjoying the lessons!" Dobby said enthusiastically.

Smiling to herself, Annabelle took John's hand and said, "Let's get some lunch at our favorite restaurant."

They had agreed with Remus and Sirius that their move would have to be sudden to lessen the chance of revealing their plans to anyone. Therefore, they did not tell any of their friends, neighbors, or employees about their plans.

When they returned from their lunch, they discovered that their house was empty except for a small table and chairs in the living room. Evidently, Dobby was very good at his job.

"It looks so different without our stuff." John commented.

Annabelle nodded her head in agreement, as she pulled out a chair and sat down. "He even painted the walls." She said in wonder.

"Amazing isn't it?" John commented.

"We should get him a gift for all of his hard work. Hermione said that he really likes mismatched socks for some reason. Why don't we pick up a few pair for him?" Annabelle said with a sly grin on her face.

John caught his wife's expression and groaned, "Not shopping? Can I at least go out for a pint afterwards?" he said hopefully.

"If you help me pick out the socks we can go to a pub afterwards." Annabelle replied before muttering something that sounded suspiciously like "after we go to a few other stores too."

"Okay, but I get to pick the pub." John replied with a smile as they completed their shopping ritual bargaining.

They chatted amiably until the doorbell rang at half past five.

John opened the door and said "Hello Remus. Please come in."

Once everyone had taken a seat around the tiny table, they began to go over the details of their move and Harry's relatives move as well.

Pulling out a small slip of parchment from his pocket, Remus handed it over to the Grangers and said; "Please read and memorize that."

The paper read, "The Grangers live at Number Two, Kensington Gardens, London." Confusion and then comprehension dawned on the Grangers faces and Remus smiled at them.

"What was that?" John asked.

"That is called the Fidelius Charm. We used magic to hide your house. Only the secret keeper can reveal the location in order for anyone to know where you live. For everyone else, the house doesn't exist." Remus explained.

"Who is the Secret Keeper?" Annabelle asked.

"I'm sorry, but it's safer if you don't know. That way no one can pull the information from your mind." Remus stated in a sad tone.

Annabelle noticed that something was bothering Remus. "Are you okay, Remus?" she asked, reaching out a hand to grasp his on the table.

"Hmm? Oh, yes. I was thinking about Harry's parents. Their secret keeper betrayed them to Voldemort." Seeing their shocked and apprehensive looks Remus quickly explained what steps they had taken to prevent history from repeating itself. "Don't worry, we made the secret keeper take an Unbreakable Vow to never betray you, and we will demand the same vow from everyone before we reveal the secret to them."

Both Grangers looked a bit surprised at this revelation. Remus gave them a moment to compose themselves before he continued explaining the additional protections on the house.

"Anyone given the secret can't share it but we want to err on the safe side, hence the Unbreakable Vow. I have also put up a variety of other wards, both offensive and defensive in nature. The house is Unplottable, meaning that no one may Apparate or Portkey in without receiving the secret. Hedwig will be the only post owl that will be able to get past the wards as we keyed her into them during construction. We made your new house one of the safest places in England. Currently only six people know of its existence, the two of you, Winky, Dobby, Sirius, and me. We will tell Harry and Hermione when we are somewhere safe and can't be overheard."

Both Grangers were shocked when Remus was finished with his explanation. Annabelle was the first to recover and she thanked Remus with a hug and a kiss on his cheek, leaving him red faced and John laughing at his blush.

Recovering from his blush, Remus stood up and said, "Well, if you are ready to go, I'll take you both there now."

Both Grangers took one last look around the house before nodding to Remus.

"Okay, grab onto my arm and I'll Apparate us over there. This is going to feel a little weird, but don't let go." When they grabbed onto his arms he turned on the spot and vanished with a pop.

When they arrived, Remus had to stifle a laugh as both of the Grangers were rubbing their ears, glaring at him. "Please follow me and concentrate on what you read earlier."

The Grangers followed Remus through the small park and when they reached the row of townhouses, they stared in awe as a building appeared on the end of the row. Remus ushered them inside quickly and the house faded from view to the outside world.

John and Annabelle stood in the entry hall of their new home still adjusting to their surroundings. There was a pair of small pops as Dobby and Winky appeared in front of them.

"Welcome to your new home Mr. and Mrs. Granger." Winky said while Dobby smiled and nodded in agreement. "Would you like a tour of the house?"

"Yes, please." Annabelle said automatically.

Remus called out; "Dobby and I will be in the kitchen putting together a snack. When you are finished with the tour I will answer any questions about the house and the surrounding area for you."

"Okay, thanks." John said before they followed Winky on a tour of the house.

The tour started in the sub basement. There was a door to their underground parking garage and their two spaces, which were also under the Fidelius Charm. There was an indoor pool with a hot tub and a fitness room located in the sub basement. The basement proper had a large office, the laundry, a guest bedroom and two full bathrooms. The basement floors were a light travertine and the rooms were a myriad of warm colors to brighten them up.

The ground floor had a comfortable family room with a large fireplace that connected only to Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. A modern kitchen with stainless steel appliances and granite counter tops took up the back half of the house. The dining room was between the other two rooms for easy access. With the high ceilings and warm colors, the whole floor had a very homey feel to it.

John and Annabelle were following Winky in stunned silence. The house was simply amazing and they had only toured half of it so far.

The first floor held the master suite. It was ‘simply beautiful,’ thought Annabelle as she looked out the window overlooking Kensington High Street. She noticed that there was no sound coming in from the outside and she guessed that it was something magical that Remus, Sirius, or one of the elves had done.

Turning her attention back to Winky’s explanations of the rooms she stopped cold when she realized that she was standing in a vast library. There were floor to ceiling shelves along the walls in a rich walnut color with matching wood paneling on the lower portions of the walls. There was even a window seat with pillows and a large fireplace on the far wall with comfortable looking chairs and a sofa arranged around it. There were a few magazines placed upon the coffee table in the center. The writing desk was located in the opposite corner underneath the other window looking out onto the park.

John Granger was having a hard time not laughing outright. He knew the moment that he saw the library that Annabelle and Hermione would absolutely love this room. He reached over, closed his wife’s mouth with a single finger, and said, “No drooling please. At least I know where to look if I cannot find you or Hermione in the house. This place is enormous!”

Annabelle blushed when her husband closed her mouth. She had not even realized that it had fallen open. She had always wanted a library in her home but they never had the space for a proper set up. She wanted to grab a book, sit in the window seat, and forget the rest of the tour.

It took her a moment to realize what John had said and then her blush intensified. With a tiny scowl on her face, she turned to him and said, “I don’t drool!”

John’s only response was a raised eyebrow and a smirk before he grabbed her hand and pulled her out of the room after Winky.

She was still spluttering and muttering under her breath about; “payback and not drooling” when they reached the bedrooms located on the third floor.

After viewing the bedrooms, they headed back down to the kitchen to chat with Remus. Once everyone was seated around the table, snacking on the food that Dobby had provided, Remus intoned; “I’m sure that you have a few questions for me. Please ask away.”

John spoke up first. “Remus, since I know that we couldn’t afford a place like this, would you please explain it to us?”

“Of course. Sirius took care of the financial arrangements by paying for the house using multiple companies as a front. We are trying to put as many obstacles as possible between you and anyone that may try to find you through normal or magical means.” Remus paused as he gazed into the Grangers eyes.

Seeing that they understood he continued; “Most wizards wouldn’t know how to sort through dozens of dummy corporations to locate your new home. The ones with contacts in your world will still have a hard time because of all of the entities that a law firm helped to set up. When they were finished we removed all of the records and Obliviated the staff.”

The Grangers were a bit shocked, and a bit impressed, by this revelation. The complexity of the entire scheme was amazing. The regular government would have trouble sorting through all of the corporations, meaning that a wizard would have almost no chance at all.

The enormity of everything came crashing down on the Grangers; this was what it meant to be involved in Harry Potter’s life. “Harry really is in danger isn’t he?” Annabelle asked with a small voice.

“Yes.” Remus answered honestly. There was no getting around that problem and the Grangers needed to know everything since they were taking him in at great personal risk to their family.

"Why purchase such an expensive house?" John asked.

"Well, your family is being uprooted and forced into hiding in a sense. This house has underground parking, twenty-four hour security and an alarm system with hidden surveillance cameras. In addition, it is in a very busy, non-magical, section of the city. Most wizards and witches avoid areas like this one and they don't blend in well when they do venture out so they are easy to spot. We tried to use every advantage that we could to make you as safe as possible." Remus answered.

"Thank you, and please thank Sirius for us too." Annabelle said while grasping one of Lupin's hands in gratitude.

"You are welcome. We would do anything to keep all of you safe. Harry has had such a hard life and your family is very important to him, and us. I do not have many friends because of my condition and you two have accepted me anyway. That means a great deal to me. So, thank you." Remus said while returning the gentle squeeze to Annabelle's hand.

The Grangers were both smiling at Remus after his declaration. "You're welcome. Thank you too. Your help and friendship is important to us as well." Annabelle said as John reached over and grasped their hands at the same time.

With a warm smile not often seen on his weathered face, Remus changed the subject. "I have another gift that I think you will both like." He said while pulling out one of the communication mirrors and passing it across the table.

"What is it?" John asked as Annabelle picked up the mirror and turned it over in her hands, inspecting it.

"That is a communication mirror. Just say the persons name into the mirror and theirs will vibrate letting them know that someone is calling." Remus said as he pulled his own mirror out of his coat pocket and called out "Annabelle!"

The mirror in her hands began to vibrate and she looked over at Remus with a questioning expression.

"To answer it, simple pick it up and say, hello." he explained.

With a smile, she said "Hello?" and instantly Remus' smiling face replaced her reflection. "Wow, it's like a cell phone with a video screen." Annabelle said with a touch of wonder in her voice as she handed the mirror to John.

"To end the conversation just say good bye. Harry and Hermione have their own mirrors so you can talk to them too. They may not answer right away though. These mirrors are a banned item at Hogwarts. It may take them a few moments to get to a secure place to talk." Remus explained to the Grangers.

"Thank you. We missed talking with Hermione during the school year." John said excitedly, surprising Remus and Annabelle. "What? I can't miss talking with my daughter during the school year?"

Annabelle looked over at Remus and mock whispered "He gets really bad separation anxiety when Hermione goes back to school each term."

"What?" John spluttered before seeing the teasing smile on his wife's face. "Why you little..."

"Ah, ah, ah; dear. You don't want to finish that sentence in front of Remus now do you?" Annabelle said mockingly before breaking out into giggles, which in turn set off Remus' own laughter.

"What is this, pick on John day?" John asked with a mock pout that sent Annabelle and Remus into further gales of laughter at his expense.

They spent the rest of the evening chatting with each other about Harry and Hermione, the results of the first task, the magical world's prejudices against non-magical people, and exactly what the wards on the house could really do to an intruder.

## Chapter 11: A friend in need.

With the Yule Ball only a few days away, the students that did not have dates were getting desperate. No one had asked Harry to the ball, mainly due to Hermione's constant presence by his side. He was sure that based upon the looks some of the girls had been giving him, and the glares that they were shooting at Hermione, that dozens of people wanted to go with the Boy-Who-Lived or a Champion. 'Bunch of bloody wankers' Harry snorted to himself.

Harry was lost in his thoughts and it took him a few seconds to realize that Neville was talking to him.

"I'm sorry Neville, I was thinking about something. What did you say?"

"That's okay Harry." Neville said chuckling at his friends antics. "I was asking what you were going to get for Hermione as a gift for going to the Ball with you."

Harry looked up at Neville with panic in his eyes. "I forgot. Oh, Merlin, she is going to kill me." He said while looking around the Great Hall for Hermione.

Fortunately, she was deep in conversation with Ginny Weasley and did not hear what they were saying. She must have sensed his discomfort through their bond because she looked over towards Harry to check on him. He smiled and waved so she returned the gesture and went back to her conversation with Ginny.

Neville was having a hard time not laughing at Harry's reactions. 'He can face a dragon but he is scared of upsetting Hermione.' He thought to himself with a chuckle. "I've been growing some flowers in the greenhouse to give to my date. Would you like me to make up a corsage for Hermione?"

Harry smiled in relief at Neville's gesture. "Can you show me how to put it together?"

Neville was surprised at the request and he quickly replied, "Sure. That would be great. She will like it even more if it came from you anyway."

"Okay. Should we do that tomorrow morning then?" after Neville's nod yes, Harry asked; "Who are you going to the ball with?"

Neville blushed a bit but his gaze drifted over to where Ginny and Hermione were talking together. "Ginny Weasley." He said proudly.

"That's great Neville!" Harry said clapping Neville on the shoulder.

The gesture of friendship from Harry surprised Neville. He had noticed that Hermione was usually the only other person that Harry would voluntary touch. "Thanks, I really like her and I think that she is very pretty. She sometimes gets that same stare you have in the common room when you are sitting in the window seat."

"Oh." Harry, shocked by Neville's comment about the 'look,' knew it well. He wore it whenever he was remembering some of the more disturbing events in his life. "I think I know what that's about."

Harry gazed over at Ginny with pensive look on his face while muttering under his breath "How could I be so stupid?" His expression became determined and he turned to Neville and said, "Com on. Let's go and get them and go somewhere private so we can talk."

Neville and Harry made their way over to where the girls were sitting. "Hi Ginny." Harry said before he leaned down and kissed Hermione's cheek. "Hey." he said softly into her ear as he stood back up. "Would you two like to take a walk with us?"

Hermione gave Harry an understanding look before holding out her hand to him with a smile. "That would be nice." She looked over at Ginny and said, "Come on, we know somewhere quiet to talk and the view is wonderful."

As the couples walked out of the Great Hall together, various people were watching them for different reasons.

Professor Dumbledore had noticed that Harry and Hermione didn't stay for very long in the Hall for meals. Especially since the Yule Ball was formally announced two weeks ago. He was concerned that Harry was isolating himself from everyone but Ms. Granger so he was pleasantly surprised to see Mr. Longbottom and Ms. Weasley leave the hall with them.

He knew that they were not leaving the grounds so he hadn't really followed them out one of their walks yet. If they continued spending time apart from the rest of the students, he would see about putting some monitoring wards out where they walked around. Monitoring Harry was more important than allowing him privacy. 'It is for the Greater Good.' thought Albus as he watched the children leave the hall.

Minerva McGonagall was also paying close attention to Harry Potter. She had watched him come out of his shell this year, despite the challenges of the Tournament and the way the Dursleys raised him. 'Ms. Granger is really good for him' she thought to herself while watching Harry lean down and kiss her cheek.

Their relationship was a bright spot in an otherwise dismal year for Harry and Minerva hoped that it would be strong enough to help him through his tasks and everything else that Dumbledore seemed to throw at him. Mr. Potter's grades were evidence enough that he was taking everything very seriously and Ms. Granger seemed much happier and more relaxed now. Part of that was also due to their fallout with Mr. Weasley she mused as she turned her gaze to the young man.

Professor McGonagall sighed as she looked over at the youngest male Weasley boy. His grades were down a bit and he was not socializing as much with his classmates. His jealousy had really surprised her. After Charlie Weasley and Madam Poppy Pomfrey had filled her in on what had happened in the hospital wing she had had a hard time not punishing him more than he was currently suffering.

The Head of Gryffindor hoped that Ronald Weasley would outgrow his jealousy and resentment before he slipped further down the dark path he was traveling and away from his one time best friends.

Ron Weasley scowled as he saw Harry reach over and clap Neville on the shoulder before they walked over to where Hermione and Ginny were talking. His gaze became even more resentful when Harry leaned down and kissed Hermione on the cheek.

'He has everything; fame, money, and now Hermione. It just isn't fair!' Ron thought bitterly. He never realized that Harry would gladly forgo the fame and money to have his parents, alive and well. The fact that Harry had a girlfriend and he didn't only made the Hermione situation harder to accept.

Ron missed his friends and they way things were before the announcing of the Triwizard Tournament Champions. He couldn't get past his pride to apologize so their friendship continued to shatter under the weight of his pride and stubbornness.

Harry, Hermione, Neville, and Ginny were waling towards the spot that Harry had created near the lake. The snow was about a foot deep on the grounds and they had their cloaks pulled tight around them for extra warmth.

When they reached the secluded spot overlooking the lake, with the castle in the background, Harry stepped aside to let the others into the garden that he had created for Hermione.

The snow didn't intrude into the small garden clearing by the shore. It stopped at the edge of the ring of Holly trees that Harry had planted to screen it from view.

Hermione, Neville, and Ginny had all stopped at the edge of the Hollies, each of them staring open mouthed at the beautiful, snow free, garden in front of them. Slowly they each began to step into the area, walking around marveling at this warm oasis in the middle of the snow-covered grounds.

A stone pathway led to the shore and another to a seating area, carved from the surrounding boulders. There was an enchanted fire burning in the center of the benches that radiated warmth.

Well-manicured flowerbeds, in a ring around the benches and next to the stone paths, dotted the landscaping. The overall effect was very peaceful and the surroundings affected each of the teens.

Harry was watching everyone's reaction to the garden. He had worked very hard, and in secret, to finish the project and he wanted to know what they all thought.

Hermione turned to Harry with a smile and said, "It's very beautiful Harry. When did you find the time to finish this?" Her voice held a note of wonder and pride that made Harry smile at her.

Neville was looking at the plants in the garden and he realized that none of them was magical. The garden held an aura of serenity that you did not often find outside of magical ones. "It's very peaceful here. You did a marvelous job Harry."

Ginny sat down on one of the benches and pulled her legs underneath her cloak. She had a soft smile playing across her lips and she seemed relaxed.

Harry went over and sat next to her on the bench with Hermione and Neville joining them. He tentatively reached out a hand and touched Ginny's shoulder. "Are you okay?" he asked her while gazing directly into her eyes.

They held each other's gaze for a few moments before Ginny finally spoke. "No, but I think that I will be. Can you tell me what happened down in the Chamber?" Ginny asked with a small hitch in her voice.

Harry surprised everyone when he leaned in and pulled Ginny into a hug. "I'm so sorry Ginny. I should have talked to you about this a long time ago. I still have nightmares about that day from time to time too." Harry admitted quietly.

Ginny was quietly crying on Harry's shoulder as he rocked her back and forth.

Hermione was rubbing Ginny's back in silent support of her friend. She knew about the events from the Chamber of Secrets but not all of the details. Harry had only told the Headmaster exactly what had happened that day. She felt that if Harry was finally going to talk to Ginny about that horrible day that it would probably help him with his nightmares about it.

Neville was shocked. He began to piece together some of the strange events from their second year. He knew that Ginny was never petrified but something had happened to her and Harry knew what it was. He reached over and patted Ginny's back and said, "If I can help in any way, I will."

Ginny gave Neville a watery smile before replying "Thanks."

Hermione and Ginny had talked about their experiences from that ordeal so she had an idea what Ginny was going through. She felt that talking with Harry about it would help bring her some closure and the ability to begin healing. She reached over and gave Ginny's shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

Harry's voice was whisper quiet when he asked, "Do you want me to tell you about what really happened down in the Chamber of Secrets?" he asked as he looked directly into Ginny's eyes.

There was a hint of fear mixed with longing in Ginny's expression but she nodded yes to his question, not trusting her voice.

Harry sat back to make himself more comfortable before he began recounting the events of his second year. Taking a deep breath, he began telling them everything that he experienced that horrible year.

He told them about his feelings of loneliness when the majority of the school shunned him for speaking Parseltongue. He also explained his feelings when Hermione was petrified and how she had figured out the clue about Slytherin's monster, the basilisk.

Ginny and Hermione were both crying as Harry explained his second year from his point of view. Ginny's was crying because Harry's explanation described much of how she felt for her entire first year.

Hermione's tears were for Harry's plight and how tough he had it and yet he still managed to persevere. She knew that he had a horrible year but this was the first time that he had explained everything in detail.

The details of what happened down in the Chamber itself left all four of them crying. However, it finally began the healing process for Ginny and furthering the progression for Harry.

Having finally heard all of the details about Harry's second year caused Hermione to reflect on his other years as a part of the magical world. She realized that his life was still very difficult.

He dwelled in both worlds, but was not really a part of either. At Hogwarts, the populace never took the time to understand, or get to know, him. Because of that, he was both revered and reviled at the same time.

This dichotomy in the Wizarding world never truly allowed Harry to integrate fully into their society. In the non-magical world his relatives despised him for existing, which lead to the same problem.

Hermione had moved over so she could hug Harry. She knew that he needed the physical reassurance that her touch brought and she craved the same thing in return. She made a vow that she would do everything in her power to provide a loving, normal, life for him.

Since their bonding, they had both been so busy with the tournament that she had not been able to dedicate much thought to it. Hermione knew that there were aspects of it that she didn't understand but that some would come with age and experience. She did know that they needed each other now more than ever.

Hermione looked over to see Neville and Ginny sharing an awkward, but reassuring, hug while whispering to each other.

Ginny stepped back from her hug with Neville and turned to Harry and Hermione with a small smile of gratitude on her face. "Thank you for telling me about what happened down in the Chamber and what you went through." She said as she pulled each of them into a hug.

Stepping back Ginny looked up at Harry and said, "If you need any help with the tournament I'll do what I can. I believed you when you said you didn't put your name in but I was too shy to say anything to you."

"Thank you. That means a lot to me." Harry said with a smile.

Hermione looked at her watch and said, "We need to get up to the castle. Ginny and I have to get ready for the Ball."

As the two girls headed off to the dorms Harry and Neville made their way down to the greenhouses to put together the corsages for their dates.

## Chapter 12: The Yule Ball.

Harry and Neville were working in Greenhouse One preparing the corsages for Hermione and Ginny. Neville had Ginny's corsage almost finished and he asked "Harry, can you grab me a fern leaf from over there please?" while pointing towards a large plant in the corner.

"Sure." Harry said while heading over to the fern in the corner. When he bent down to grab a leaf, he felt something grab his thigh. "GAAHH!" he cried out while jumping away from the groping appendage, spinning around with his wand in his hand.

He found Neville howling with laughter as he pointed to the creeper vine that had grabbed Harry. "Bloody plant." Harry mumbled while giving the vine a very wide berth on the way back to their workstation.

Neville saw Harry giving the creeper a lot of room and a nasty glare and it caused him to start laughing all over again.

Fifteen minutes later both boys had finished putting together the corsages for their dates, so they headed back up to the common room to get ready for the dance.

They were both waiting anxiously for Hermione and Ginny to join them in the common room. Harry turned to Neville and asked, "Why does it take them so long to get ready anyway?"

However, Neville did not answer. He was standing ramrod straight and staring at the two beautiful girls that were coming down the stairs towards them.

Harry's breath caught in his throat when he shifted his gaze to follow Neville's' eyes.

Hermione and Ginny shared a knowing look and approached the stupefied boys.

Neville was the first to recover and he said, "Ginny, you look amazing!" while handing her the corsage. "You too Hermione." he said with a smile.

Hermione smiled at Neville's compliment but she only had eyes for Harry. He had this wistful smile on his face as he stepped towards her. She could feel his emotions pouring through their bond; and the overwhelming feeling of love made her smile truly radiant.

Harry felt like he was in a trance as he moved towards Hermione. He didn't even realize that he was broadcasting his emotions to her until he felt hers come back just as strong. He stepped close to her and tenderly cupped her cheek in his hand. "I love you." He said softly while looking deep into her eyes before leaning in for a soft kiss.

Hermione had tears at the corner of her eyes as they pulled apart. "I love you too." She said as she leaned into an embrace and whispered into his ear "My husband."

Harry's smile was threatening to split his face in half it was so big. He continued grinning the entire time as he placed the corsage on Hermione's wrist. When he took a step back he noticed that her dress matched his robes and he figured that Winky must have done that for them, he would have to thank her later.

He shifted his gaze to Neville and Ginny and noticed that the two of them were red cheeked but smiling at them. Confused, Harry asked "What?"

Ginny couldn't help it; she broke out in a fresh set of giggles which in turn set off Neville's laughter and put a half smirk on Hermione's face.

"Do I have something on my face?" Harry asked while rubbing his cheeks.

That set everyone into even bigger fits of laughter.

Ginny finally composed herself and said "No silly. It was how you reacted to Hermione. You looked at her as if she was the only other person in the room. I can tell you really love each other." She finished

saying as she blushed. She gathered herself and continued speaking, "It was like watching something private." She said in a whisper.

By now, Harry was trying to fight back his own blush and failing miserably. Giving that up as a bad job, he said; "I do love Hermione and you're right. I didn't notice anything else once I saw her." He gave Hermione's hand a squeeze and turned back to Ginny "I'm sorry that I didn't say anything to you Ginny. You look very beautiful too."

"Shall we head down then?" Neville asked while holding out his arm for Ginny.

Looping her arm through Neville's, Ginny said "Sure. Oh, I am so excited! I always wanted to go to the Yule Ball since it was announced." Turning to Neville, she gave him a quick peck on the cheek and said "Thank you for inviting me Neville."

Harry and Hermione had to stifle their laughter as they followed the other couple to the Great Hall. Neville kept reaching up to touch his cheek where Ginny had kissed him.

When they arrived at the Great Hall Professor McGonagall pulled Harry and Hermione to the side and sent Neville and Ginny on their way.

"Please join the other Champions over there so we can announce you." The professor said as she pointed towards the other champions and their dates.

With a nod of understanding, Harry and Hermione joined the waiting group of champions. Once everyone had said his or her hellos, Harry whispered to Hermione, "Look at how Roger reacts to Fleur. She's part Veela; she said so during the Weighing of the Wands Ceremony before the tournament. I have noticed that she has that effect on some of the other students too. Weird, isn't it?"

Inwardly Hermione was highly amused. Harry did not realize why Veela affected some people. She leaned into Harry's side and whispered "Only people with disciplined minds or that are deeply in love aren't affected, and you are both."

"Oh." Harry said as a light blush appeared on his cheeks.

"And I love you too." Hermione said as she kissed his cheek.

Professor McGonagall returned and escorted the champions and their dates into the Great Hall.

Harry was amused and annoyed at his classmates as he kept hearing snippets about him and Hermione. A few of the snide remarks would have stopped him in his tracks if it were not for Hermione.

She was ignoring all of the whispering with a smile. Feeling Harry's irritation, she said, "They're just jealous. Ignore them, or smile at them as it will just irritate them more." Hermione spoke with a glint in her eye.

Harry could feel a bit of her irritation and sadness while people were making fun of her. He made mental notes of who was making the snide comments that hurt so he could repay them later. Outwardly, he appeared to ignore them as he kept a smile plastered on his face.

Albus Dumbledore was watching Harry Potter very closely as the pair approached the Champions table. He was surprised when he saw Hermione whisper something to him and his scowl shifted to a smile that looked almost predatory.

Seeing that smile on Harry's face sent shudders down the Headmaster's spine. He had seen a very similar smile on the face of Tom Riddle fifty-two years ago. It was over the Chamber of Secrets incident, which led to Hagrid's expulsion. Albus quickly replaced the shocked expression with a smile as the Champions drew closer.

Severus Snape was glancing over at the Headmaster when he saw the shocked expression flit across his face but a smile quickly replaced the look. Following the Headmaster's gaze his eyes came to rest upon Potter and the Granger girl both wearing smiles as they walked down the aisle.

He was just about to avert his gaze when he realized that Potter now had his eyes fixed upon him. That infernal smile was still plastered upon his face too. Snape tilted his head a fraction to the side as he pondered the look upon Potter's face.

There was something familiar about that smile, but it was eluding him right now. What he did realize was that smile had feral quality about it and it put him on edge. He decided that he would have to keep a much closer eye on the boy from now on.

Draco Malfoy had been glaring at Harry as soon as he entered the hall with his Mudblood girlfriend. He watched them until they had taken their seats at the Champions Table before turning to talk to his date, Pansy Parkinson. After a few seconds, he felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up on end. Sweeping his gaze across the Great Hall his eyes came to a stop when he saw that unnatural shade of green eyes of Potters boring right into him accompanied by a very predatory smirk.

He felt a very cold shudder travel down his back under that gaze. After a few seconds, Draco dismissed the warning feeling in his arrogance. He felt that there was nothing he had to fear from Harry Potter, he was a Malfoy after all. He sent a quick smirk back at Potter before turning his attention back to Pansy's inane babbling.

Hermione had felt the shift in Harry's emotions as he gazed around the room. They were almost animalistic in nature. She paused in her conversation with Percy Weasley about cauldron bottoms and reached out to Harry through their bond.

Harry felt Hermione's emotional prod and he took her hand and turned to face her. "Are you okay?" she whispered to him as she leaned close to his ear.

He nodded yes and said, "Just doing a little thinking. I'll tell you about it later." Harry said as he planted a quick kiss on her cheek.

As the meal progressed, Harry's admiration for Hermione's conversation skills grew. She was able to converse with everyone seated around the table without being intimidated. She had changed

a lot this year, and he knew that it was for the better, and so had he for that matter.

Hermione had lost her blind faith in adults and authority figures. Because of these changes, she was now a well-rounded individual. Harry knew that he had undergone something similar. Except with him, it was a loss of the last of his innocence. The tournament and the events surrounding it had stripped it away. The biggest change had been his relationship with Hermione. He could not imagine his life without her in it anymore.

Minerva McGonagall was pleasantly surprised at how well Harry was handling himself this evening with everything thrown at him. When she saw him lean over and kiss Ms. Granger's cheek, she knew that they really loved each other. Their feelings for each other balanced out some of the hardships in his life. She gave Hermione a small smile as they continued their conversation.

When the meal was finished, everyone began heading towards the dance floor and the stage where the Weird Sisters were waiting to begin playing.

The Champions and their partners spread out on the dance floor and they began moving in step as the opening notes of the waltz began.

Harry was very thankful for the dancing lessons now. He felt at ease with Hermione in his arms even though the entire hall was watching them dance. About halfway through the opening dance, the teachers and the rest of the faculty and students joined in.

Neville and Ginny were dancing near Harry and Hermione. After a couple of songs, they switched partners. Harry was twirling Ginny around the dance floor and watching the smile on her face. "You look like you are enjoying yourself."

Ginny looked up at Harry and said, "I am. I'm glad that Neville invited me. I was really looking forward to attending the ball. I feel like a princess all dressed up."

"You are pretty Ginny." Harry said simply, causing her to blush. "Neville thinks so too. He told me when he was plucking up the courage to ask you to the dance."

Ginny's eyes had gone as big as saucers and they flicked up to look into Harry's emerald ones. In a tiny voice that barely carried above the music, she said, "Really?"

Harry smiled and nodded, yes.

Ginny squealed, threw her arms around his neck, and hugged him. When they broke apart from their hug, Harry grabbed her hand and pulled her over to where Hermione and Neville were dancing. "Can we trade back? I think that there are some things that you two need to talk about." Harry said with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

"What was that about Harry?" Hermione asked as they resumed dancing.

"Let's just say that I was helping someone get over their crush on me and to realize that there was someone else out there that really liked her." Harry said with a smile.

Hermione smiled and kissed him on the cheek. "I didn't think that you knew about her crush? I'm glad that you were willing to talk to her about Neville."

"I knew about it." Harry said as he spun Hermione around once more before pulling her tight against his chest. "I just wasn't prepared to deal with it before and Neville really does like her."

Hermione's arms tightened their embrace around Harry's back and she put her head down on his shoulder.

They remained in that position, twirling slowly as the band played on in the background. When the song was over, they slowly untangled themselves.

"Would you like to go for a walk in the garden?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, I think that I would." Harry said as he held out his hand to her and made their way outside together.

Professors Sprout and Flitwick had set up the enchanted garden for the Yule Ball. Its design fit in with the holiday season and the theme for the ball. It was quite romantic and there were dozens of couples taking advantage of it. The bushes that lined the garden paths were full of fairies for light and decoration.

The young couple found a bench at the far end of the garden that looked back towards the well-lit castle.

"Thank you for teaching me how to dance. I had a really nice time tonight." Harry said while leaning into Hermione.

"You're welcome. I had a nice time too." She said while resting her head against his, relishing their closeness.

## Chapter 13: Having a bad day.

Two days after the Yule Ball Rita Skeeter struck again. There were two stories on the front page and their headlines were in huge letters.

The first article was about “Dumbledore’s Big Mistake”<sup>1</sup>. It painted Dumbledore in an unfavorable light and Harry was pleased to see the headmaster having to deal with some bad press and its encompassing issues. What upset Harry slightly was that the article also hurt Hagrid.

Harry’s feelings towards Hagrid had cooled over the last half a year as he discovered more about his godfather, Sirius, better. He knew that Hagrid had been the one to deliver him to the Dursleys that fateful night on Dumbledore’s orders.

What he found out last year, and later confirmed by Sirius, was that Hagrid had prevented Sirius from taking him that night even though he knew that Sirius was his godfather, and legal guardian.

That made Hagrid, a child in a giant’s body, a kidnapper on Dumbledore’s orders. Hagrid realized none of that; the greatness of Albus Dumbledore blinded him from the truth. Harry knew that as the Head of the Wizengamot, Dumbledore could have arranged for the reversal of Hagrid’s expulsion and gotten him the right to carry a wand again. The information about his involvement with Harry’s placement would have severe repercussions if it became public, hence, no trial.

Sirius’s situation was definitely unique. Harry did not know why the headmaster hadn’t arranged for a trial with the evidence that Pettigrew was alive. Remus had explained that Veritaserum would force anyone to tell the truth. The puzzling thing was why Dumbledore did not arrange for a trial.

Sirius had taken the time to explain the events surrounding that fateful night in October. Harry understood that Sirius didn’t abandon him but that he wasn’t thinking clearly in his grief and anger and it had cost both of them everything.

Harry took this lesson to heart and he tried his best to remain level headed no matter how angry or sad he was. That was why he was still upset at his loss of control in the Great Hall over Rita's last article.

His good mood over the article about Dumbledore evaporated quickly when he saw the second headline, and accompanying photo, in the Daily Prophet. 'Potters Pureblood Princess,' took up the entire upper bottom third of the front page. The photo showed him and Ginny hugging before they walked away smiling and holding hands.

The article went on at length about how Harry had finally broken free from his love potions induced stupor and had found true love in the arms of Ginny Weasley. Rita vilified Hermione, again. The decisive factor for Harry was when Rita called for an investigation of Hermione for the obvious use of an illegal love potion on the Boy-Who-Lived.

Harry was desperately trying to reign in his temper. The dishes around him had begun to rattle ominously. After a few deep breaths, he was starting to calm down and the dishes stopped rattling.

Unfortunately, just as Harry regained control of his temper two things happened that set him off all over again.

Draco Malfoy had sauntered over towards Harry with the Daily Prophet clutched in his hands and a sneer on his face.

"Finally saw the light, eh, Potter?" Malfoy drawled. "Ditched the Mudblood and found yourself a proper pure blood, even if she is from a family of blood traitors." Draco said with a sneer while pointing at Ginny, who was sitting across from Harry at the Gryffindor table.

Trying very hard to maintain control of his temper, Harry hissed, "I am not dating Ginny Weasley. I am in love with Hermione. Now leave you pathetic inbred fool before I do something that you will regret."

The dishes had started to rattle again, and a few even cracked, as Harry's anger rose. Magic was beginning to pour off Harry in small pulses he was so mad.

Draco could feel the power coming off Harry, as could anyone within twenty feet of him. He knew that it would only take one more little push for something bad to happen. Deciding that he did not want to be on the receiving end of Potter's outburst he began to back away slowly and silently.

He had gone about four feet when salvation arrived in the most unlikely form. Seizing his chance, Draco began backing away a little faster.

The Weasley temper had boiled over again, saving Draco from embarrassment in front of the whole school.

A hand gripped Harry's upper arm and spun him around violently. The shock of being grabbed momentarily quenched Harry's anger.

"What's the matter now Potter? Is my sister not good enough for the Boy-Who-Lived? She's much better than a nagging, know-it-all, bookworm." Ron said heatedly.

Quickly realizing that things were getting out of hand fast, Draco and a bunch of other students were backing further away from a shocked and angry Harry Potter.

There was a shout followed by the oddest squelching noise that caused a few people in the Great Hall to jump and then laugh when they saw the results of the spell.

Ron Weasley was lying on his back, slapping at the disgusting bat boogies hitting his face. Ginny Weasley was standing with her wand still pointed at her brother as he writhed around on the floor trying to escape the attacking boogies.

Draco saw the look on Ginny's face as she hexed her brother. By the time Weasley hit the floor, Draco was a good twenty feet away from the Gryffindor table. His self-preservation instincts kept him quiet as he continued to back away from the scene in front of him.

"Thanks Ginny. You have got to teach me that spell." Harry said with a light chuckle as he stepped back from the bogies attacking Ron. Amidst the chaos, his anger disappeared.

"You're welcome." Ginny said before she turned her attention back to her pillock of a brother. "Ron, if you had tried to get a date and actually show up for the ball, you would know that I went with Neville, whom I like a lot."

Neville was grinning like a Cheshire cat and trying to match the color of Ginny's hair with his blush. "Thanks, I like you too Ginny."

They linked hands and left the Great hall together, both still blushing from their confessions in front of everyone.

Harry knelt down next to Ron and whispered, "You just don't learn do you?" He stood back up, pointed his wand at Ron, and said "Stupefy."

Harry glanced around after watching Ron slip into unconsciousness. 'Why hadn't a teacher stepped in?' When he looked up at the staff table, he only saw the headmaster sitting there, watching him, but making no move to intervene. He could not figure out why Dumbledore didn't interfere before everything got out of hand.

Deciding that he didn't really care, Harry pointed his wand at Ron and said "Mobilicorpus."

As Ron rose into the air Harry began directing him towards the exit. Just as he reached the stairs to the second floor, Professor McGonagall and Hermione came out of the transfiguration classroom.

"What are you doing with Mr. Weasley, Mr. Potter?"

"Hello Professor; hello Hermione. Ron got hexed in the Great Hall and I'm taking him to the Hospital Wing." he indicated to the bat bogeys still attacking Ron's face.

He could have sworn that he saw a smile on his professor's face but it was gone in a flash.

"And why is he unconscious?" McGonagall asked.

"Well," Harry hesitated but one quick look at his head of house's face made him quickly continue "I kind of stunned him." he mumbled.

"What was that Mr. Potter?"

Taking a deep breath, Harry said in a clear voice, "I stunned him because I didn't know the counter jinx. He was slapping at his face and moaning like a baby so I did the first thing that came to my mind."

The professor gazed at the disgusting bogies still flapping around on Mr. Weasley's face was a bit nauseating, so Minerva dispelled them with a quick flick of her wrist. "Very well, take him up to the Hospital Wing then. Who was the teacher on duty in the Great Hall this morning Mr. Potter?"

"Professor Dumbledore was ma'am."

"Hmm." Minerva said through pursed lips. "Thank you Mr. Potter. You two are free to enjoy your morning once you drop Mr. Weasley off at the hospital wing."

"Thank you, professor." The two teens chorused together as Harry levitated Ron up the steps towards the hospital wing.

"What happened in the Great Hall Harry?" Hermione asked.

Harry was about to answer her when he noticed a portrait moving from frame to frame, following them. "Ron got hexed so I stunned him to stop the screaming." He answered while watching as the portrait continued to flit from frame to frame, as they got closer to the hospital wing.

When Harry had floated Ron to the nearest bed, the portrait had settled into the frame near the matron's office.

Hermione gave Harry a searching gaze before dashing off to fetch Madam Poppy Pomfrey.

The hospital matron bustled over and asked, "What happened to Mr. Weasley?"

Harry's gaze shifted sideways for a moment so he could see the portrait in the frame. It was listening in on their conversation intently. "I stunned him because he was screaming and slapping at his face from the hex that hit him. Professor McGonagall dispelled the hex but told me to bring him up here just to be safe."

Madam Poppy Pomfrey swept her wand along Ron's unconscious body. A quick healing spell on his nose later she was satisfied with her patient's condition. As she put her wand away, she said, "He'll be fine and should wake up in a few hours. Run along and have a nice day."

The two teens left the hospital wing hand in hand. The only place he could think of that did not have any portraits was their spot by the lake.

Hermione realized that something was bothering Harry but he seemed reluctant to talk about it while inside for some reason. Figuring that he would answer her questions once they were outside of the castle, she settled into a comfortable silence.

She had felt Harry's anger through the bond when she was talking with professor McGonagall. His anger had spiked a couple of times in the span of a few minutes before it vanished abruptly; in its place was a feeling of mirth.

They had reached their spot down by the lake and Harry pulled Hermione down onto the bench next to him. He gazed into her eyes for a moment before speaking quietly "We were being followed through the halls by a portrait."

Hermione instantly knew who had ordered the portraits to follow Harry. The question was 'Why?'

1. Goble of Fire, JKR. Paraphrased from the original title, Dumbledore's Giant Mistake.

## Chapter 14: Unwelcome discoveries.

Life was slowly returning to normal in the castle following the winter holidays. Well, as close to normal as you could get for Harry.

Since the end of the first task, Harry had discovered that he no longer needed to vocalize his spells in class. He had to remember to say the spells aloud to keep this new talent secret.

Harry had told Hermione about the change, she had urged him to keep that skill hidden, and he agreed. Her reasoning was sound, as it would give him an advantage for a few precious seconds if something happened. So every day during his practice in the Room of Requirement, Harry would devote an hour solely on silent casting.

He noticed that his wand movements were decreasing. He no longer needed the lengthy flicks, swishes, and loops to get his spells to perform. The only people he could compare his new casting style to were the Headmaster and Professors Flitwick and McGonagall. Harry spent a good portion of his class time watching the adults in the castle to see how they performed magic. Some of the seventh year students were also capable of complete silent casting all of the time, but not everyone seemed to have the ability to master the skill.

Hermione had questioned him for hours over how he cast his spells silently and verbally. She was now able to cast most of the first year spells silently. Additionally, she was intently working on mastering the second year ones too.

Another side effect of the first task was that Harry now felt more in touch with his magic and the magic around him. It took him a few days to get the second skill under better control. There was so much magic in Hogwarts that it was difficult to sort everything out at first.

As Harry's control over sensing magic increased, he discovered a few other benefits of the skill. The first thing that Harry figured out was how to sense the magic on objects. He could tell if there were charms, wards, hexes, and curses on objects. He had found a tracking spell on his glasses that he quickly removed. He found one after searching his person for an hour that angered him.

There were also a couple of other spells that were on him that he was going to have to research what they were. He planned to ask Hermione and Remus to assist him in identifying them. One of the spells he found on himself was very dark in nature and it was worrying him more than he wanted to admit.

After Hermione explained the theory behind the tracking spell, it took Harry three days to figure out how to undo the spell. He used his own magic to break down the tracking spell and remove it.

His jubilation at removing the tracking charm was short lived though. The dark curse that attached to him did not respond to the same method. Harry had pulled some of the dark tendrils free but as he tried to remove the remainder of the curse, he felt a tugging sensation from the area around his scar before it snapped back into place on his forehead.

"Damn it!" Harry exclaimed while rubbing the scar on his forehead.

Hermione looked up at Harry's shout to see him pressing his palm to the scar on his forehead. "What's wrong?"

"Whenever I get close to removing whatever this dark curse is on my forehead it feels like it just snaps back into place." Harry barked out in frustration.

"Hey, it's okay. We will figure this out together. I'll ask Remus to send us a book on curse scars." She said while rubbing his back. "What does it look like when you are visualizing the connection?"

Harry looked at her in surprise. "You know, I don't know. I am not visualizing anything. It's more like sensing its connection to Me." he paused in thought, trying to recall the sensations from trying to remove the connection to his scar. "It feels...really evil." his voice just a whisper as if to ward off the feeling.

"Do you think that your scar is somehow related to the vision that you had the day of the World Cup?"

Somehow, his scar and that vision were connected, they concluded. They just didn't know why, or how, the correlation existed.

"Yes, I still think that's the best explanation that either of us has come up with so far." Harry replied glumly. "You know, when Hagrid first took me to Diagon Alley he told me that this was no ordinary curse scar. I wonder what he meant by that?"

"I don't know Harry. We should talk to Remus and Sirius about that later. Why don't you take a break for a bit and tell me about the other spell that you found on yourself." Hermione said.

Harry's visage darkened at the mention of the second spell and he stood up to pace around a bit. "It's a form of a monitoring charm." he said darkly.

"What? Who would do something like that to you?" Hermione asked. She was outraged that something so invasive, and without his consent, was being put upon him. His emotions were easy to pick up through their bond. He was angry but resigned.

Then she realized why and one word confirmed her fears. "Dumbledore." It was a statement, not a question.

Harry flopped back down onto the couch next to Hermione and sighed deeply. "Yes, it was him. I have been watching him enough to get a feel for his magic, he is the only one capable enough to cast that spell, and that has had access to me. My guess is that it was placed upon me while I was in the hospital wing or when he delivered me to the Dursleys."

Left unsaid was that it was probably put upon Harry before he was placed with the Dursleys thirteen years ago. That made Dumbledore's lack of supervision even worse, because that spell told him everything about Harry's condition.

"Aren't you going to remove the spell?" Hermione asked in concern.

Harry rubbed his hands down his face in frustration. "I'm not sure if I should. It's been damaged somehow but if I remove it he is going to

know right away and that could pose all sorts of problems." he said remorsefully.

"Why don't you remove it this summer? That way he can't confront you immediately and we will have time to come up with a cover story if he does ask." Hermione said hopefully while gazing into Harry's bright emerald eyes.

"That could work. We'll ask Moony and Sirius before we do anything though." Harry said.

Glancing down at his watch, he realized that it was almost curfew. "Come on. Let's get back to Gryffindor Tower before we get detention." Harry said as he pulled Hermione up from the couch.

"You're right. We have double potions first thing tomorrow morning and we need to be at our best for that class." Hermione said as she re-shrunk the trunk and put it back into her pocket.

Harry had out his invisibility cloak and the Marauder's Map for their trip back to the tower. With a flick of his wrists, he draped the cloak over them and stepped out into the empty hallway.

## Chapter 15: Eggs, Elves, and Pranks.

The second task was fast approaching and Harry still hadn't figured out what to do about his egg. Cedric had given him the advice to take a bath with the egg earlier that morning and he had told Hermione about it.

She had dashed off to the library with a quick, "I've got an idea.", and she was gone before he could get in a word edge wise.

Harry was more concerned with something else right now anyway. He had been quietly watching the comings and goings of certain individuals into meal times for the past week. It was time to exact a little payback for all of the pain that they caused Hermione with their spiteful remarks. He didn't really mind what they said about him anymore. It had stopped bothering him ages ago, something that he really did have Dumbledore to thank for teaching him.

There was a flash of a green trimmed cloak entering the Great Hall and Harry turned his gaze to see who it was. According to his calculations, it should have been Malfoy and his little entourage.

A small, satisfied, smirk graced Harry's face as he watched the group sit down at the Slytherin table for lunch. He flicked his eyes to the rafters where he knew that Dobby was watching and nodded once.

Dobby was watching his master, waiting for the signal. When it came, he almost fell off the rafter because he was so happy. A gift that was so enormous that he could not even describe it. The great Harry Potter was offering him a chance at revenge for years of mistreatment at the hands of the Malfoy heir.

With a faint pop, Dobby reappeared in the kitchens. He had enlisted the help of the kitchen elves for the first stage of the plan.

If anyone would have come into the kitchen at that moment, they would have been frightened silly. The sight of a house elf cackling madly and rubbing his hands together was very disturbing.

Dobby had learned a lot about the non-magical world from the Grangers. The best thing that they introduced him to was something that they called television. While watching something called an infomercial, he discovered something that would be a great help to his master in his plans to avenge the mistreatment of Mistress Mione.

The rest of the elves were busy mixing in an odorless, tasteless, product into all of the beverages for select individuals that were currently in the Great Hall for lunch. It had been surprising easy for Dobby and Winky to coerce the rest of the Hogwarts elves to help them in their endeavor. All that they had to do was tell them that what they were doing would help Harry Potter and the rest of the elves readily agreed to the plan.

It turned out that the majority of the people on the list were not very nice to the house elves of Hogwarts. So in a way they were getting a bit of revenge too.

The polyethylene glycol solution was easily obtainable in the non-magical world. When Dobby told Mr. Granger what the solution was for his only response was "How much do you need?" The look on Mr. Granger's face was simply terrifying and Dobby was glad that his ire was not focused upon him.

Dobby had procured enough solution, with Mr. Granger's help, for complete bowel irrigations for over thirty people. He wanted to have a little extra in case a repeat lesson was necessary.

The housekeeping elves were busy making sure that there were no bog rolls in any of the student loos in the castle. The staff areas had a full stock so that no teacher would be aware of the student body's dilemma.

The laundry elves were thrilled at the prospect of getting more work in the near future. They just weren't busy enough during the day and this would definitely keep them busy.

Hermione was in the library when Winky popped in and said "Hello Miss. This is for your bag today." she said while putting a brand new bog roll into her bag.

She had given up trying to figure out why their elves did some of the things that they did because there was always a good reason for their actions. Their uncanny ability to anticipate the needs of their family was simply amazing. Pushing the thought from her mind, she said to Winky "Thank you Winky. Have a pleasant afternoon."

Winky curtsied and vanished with a small pop. She reappeared next to Dobby in the kitchens and told him that she had completed her task. She had also delivered similar rolls to the tiniest Weasley and the Longbottom boy on her master's instruction.

Preparations complete, all the elves had to do now was to wait for the extra work to start rolling in. They were so happy that they were going to be busy later that day.

Harry finished his meal in silence and made his way up towards the library. When he sat down next to Hermione, she unconsciously reached over and patted Harry's thigh. He successfully fought down his urge to flinch but he noticed that it was getting better.

He was really trying hard to get over that aspect of his childhood. The Dursleys' never touched him in anything but anger so his reactions to being touched were very abnormal. Hermione's parents had sent along a few books with Winky with instructions for the two teens to read them.

Harry had been a bit embarrassed when he saw the books about child abuse and its effects on people. He was desperately trying to overcome the obstacles of his upbringing and he was truly thankful for their assistance. Remus and Sirius had not been much help on that front. The Wizarding world just did not have the resources dedicated to that branch of medicine.

Hermione felt Harry tense for just a split second before he relaxed under her delicate, but unexpected, touch. She smiled to herself and continued with her research. She had narrowed the noise in the egg down to something to do with the water. She thought that the noise was from something that lived in the lake or spent the majority of it's

time in the water. What she did not know was what the task was going to be.

She turned to Harry and said, "I think that I have a basic idea of what the noise from the egg is. I guess that we will have to hear it later to get any more information. I think that Cedric wants you to open it underwater in the bath."

Harry smiled at Hermione. "You're really brilliant you know? I'm still trying to figure out what an egg and water have to do with each other and here you are figuring out the basics of the second task without hearing the clue yet." He said with a smile in his voice as he leaned over to look at what she was reading.

Hermione tilted the book so Harry could see the page that she was reading. "Here, I think that these are the most likely things that you will encounter in the lake. I need to go look up something else, be back in a tick."

Harry pulled the book to him as Hermione got up and disappeared amongst the shelves, looking for another book. The chapter heading was 'Creatures found in the Great Lake.'

Shrugging his shoulders, Harry began reading. He got about five pages into the chapter when he realized what book he was reading. It was 'Hogwarts, a History.' He and Ron had jokingly made a vow during their first year that they would never read the book because Hermione had carried it everywhere.

When Hermione returned to the table, she looked quite satisfied with herself. The book in her hands was about mermaids and speaking Mermish. She saw that Harry was looking at the book with a half smirk, half scowl, on his face. "What's wrong?" she asked.

Harry replied "I can't read this, Ron and I jokingly made a vow to never read 'Hogwarts; A History' during our first year."

"Why you..." Hermione started before she realized that he was having her on. "Oh, I see how it is then. I guess that I will never read

'Quidditch; Through the Ages' then. She said while putting her nose in the air with a look of superiority.

Harry almost laughed aloud at the thought of Hermione not reading a book. "I see, so we can just forget about you reading any of these other wonderful books too?" he said with a teasing lilt in his voice as he began to pull her stack of books towards him.

"NO!" Hermione cried while reaching out and pulling the stack back to her side of the table. Realizing that she had just lost their little game, Hermione began blushing while grinning back at him. The heat in her cheeks felt like a miniature flame.

Still chuckling, Harry pointed to the book on merpeople and said, "Can I read that with you?" Without waiting for a response, he pulled her chair next to his and leaned his head down on her shoulder.

"Okay." Hermione replied, enjoying the feeling of contentment that came with having Harry's head resting on her shoulder.

After about fifteen minutes of reading, Hermione realized that Harry had fallen asleep. He gave a mighty shudder and slumped onto the floor, in the throes of what appeared to be a nightmare, when she was about to wake him.

Harry gave a start as he realized that he was having another vision of Voldemort. Wormtail was on his knees in front of a large, winged back, chair. He was begging for mercy and Harry felt a sense of jubilation coming from Voldemort.

Before he could figure the feeling out, he raised his wand and lazily said "Crucio." Peter Pettigrew was writhing on the ground, screaming in pain. Oddly enough, Harry thought that he got a flicker of a feeling of pleasure from Voldemort.

He could not see what Voldemort looked like, because he was seeing things from Voldemorts' point of view. This vision was a bit different from the one just before the Quidditch World Cup. This time he was Voldemort instead of just watching things unfold as if a bystander.

Harry was struggling to keep his wits about him as the vision continued. The shock of seeing his tiny, scaly, arm come up and cast that unforgivable shook him just enough that he was able to pay attention but not getting the feeling that he committed the acts himself.

Voldemorts' voice issuing from his own mouth was even scarier if possible. There was no way that sound was human! His speech had a hissing quality to it.

"You are lucky that my other servant saved you from your mistake. If Crouch Sr. had been able to reach Dumbledore we would have been exposed, on the run again, and our plans ruins. Lord Voldemort is merciful. Now go and milk Nagini for my evening feeding." Voldemort hissed in a low voice as he motioned his tiny hand towards the door.

With a start, Harry's eyes snapped open and he began wildly looking all around him, fear plainly visible on his face.

"Shhh. You're in the library. Can you stand?" Hermione asked, very concerned.

Harry slowly stood up and allowed himself to be led to the exit. Hermione had tucked herself under his arm so that he could lean on her if he needed to while still looking like two normal teens that were dating.

He knew that she had asked him something but her voice sounded like it was muffled by a wall of water in between them. His body was operating on instinct and allowed Hermione to lead him out of the library.

Just as the two teens turned the corner there were two pops in front of them. "What is wrong with Master Harry?" Dobby said, his voice quavering a bit, as he stepped forward to assist his mistress in getting Harry to some place quiet.

Winky was moving to help but Hermione stilled her with a command. "Wait please Winky. Can you block the portraits from seeing or following us?"

Winky looked a bit surprised at the request but her answer was a positive one. "I will see to it at once Mistress Hermione." with a snap of her fingers all of the portraits in the hall were immobilized, and their picture frames had been draped with a black cloth.

Hermione was impressed with the tiny elf's control of magic, but she had more important things on her mind, so she pushed those thoughts aside for the moment and concentrated on getting Harry to the Room of Requirement so that they could contact Sirius and Remus.

They were a few hallways away from the Room of Requirement when Harry finally felt normal enough to walk on his own. He kept his arm around Hermione and realized that Dobby was walking next to him in case he should stumble. His voice sounded like broken glass as he croaked out "Thank you."

By the time they reached to entrance to the Room he was feeling completely back to normal. They entered a replica of the Gryffindor Common Room and he sat down on the couch and Hermione pulled his head into her lap and began running her hands through his hair in a soothing fashion.

"Mum used to do this for me when I had a nightmare. Are you ready to talk about it yet?" she asked him quietly.

Harry lay there with his head in her lap, enjoying her calming touch as he was going over the whole experience in his head. This was no mere nightmare; of that, he was sure. He was not going to call it a vision either. It was too connected, he was feeling some of Voldemort's emotions in an eerily similar way to the way he felt Hermione's emotions.

To say that this revelation disturbed Harry would be an understatement. His shock was so great that he didn't realize that Hermione had been talking to him again and was now looking at him in concern.

"What's the matter Harry?" You look worse now than when you first had the vision." Hermione asked while gently stroking his cheek.

"I think that this connection is a bit worse than we thought before." he whispered, trying to ward off the dark feeling of foreboding that was filling him up. "I could feel his emotions and it scares me. What if I'm somehow bonded to him too?" He was close to tears by this time, his fears running rampant through his mind.

Hermione was more than a little shocked by this last revelation. Something did not add up for her though. She was remembering what Harry had mentioned about his scar when he tried to unravel the dark curse that was located there. Tentatively, and in a whisper as low as the one that he had spoken in a moment before, Hermione asked him "Do you think that your scar is acting like a connection to Voldemort somehow?"

Harry unconsciously reached up and ran a finger down his scar, tracing its contours, while he was lost in thought. Hermione had a novel idea about his scar and he was afraid that, as usual, she was spot on in her assessment.

The desperation was clear in his voice when he answered her. "Yes, I do. It is similar to our bond in ways but I think it revolves on my scar because when I get close to unraveling it there is a strong pulling sensation there before it snaps back into place. It's like there is something holding there. It feels like it's getting stronger too." Harry finished in a voice that was very worried. "What do you think that it all means?" he asked her in desperation.

"I don't know Harry but I'll do everything that I can to figure this out. I'm sure that Remus and Sirius will help too. Perhaps we should call them now?" Hermione's voice was firm in her conviction to help Harry face this new situation.

Hermione pulled out her mirror and handed it to Harry so he could make the call.

Taking a deep breath to steel himself, with the help of Hermione's feelings of support pouring through their bond, Harry called out "Sirius Black."

After a few tense seconds, the mirror activated to show the teens the smiling visage of Sirius. "Harry! What can we do for you?" After seeing the look on their faces, he quickly asked, "Are you okay?" his voice laced with concern.

"I had another vision or something from Voldemort a little while ago." Harry said solemnly. "Only this time I was seeing things from his point of view. I was him. I could feel his emotions while he was torturing Wormtail. Is this normal?" his voice barely above a whisper as he clung tightly to Hermione's hand, feeling unclean after being in Voldemorts' mind.

Remus had just entered the room when he heard the concern in Sirius's voice. He saw the mirror in Sirius's hand and figured that he was talking to Harry or Hermione and that something was wrong. He arrived next to Sirius just as Harry launched into his explanation of what he experienced and he was more than a little disturbed.

The connection sounded like the darkest of magic and something was niggling at the back of his mind. Remus knew that he had read a book from the Black Library containing information that sounded almost identical to what Harry described.

"I have come across something similar in my readings Harry. I will start researching that right away. Hang in there and call us straight away if something like this happens again." Remus said in a very somber tone.

Harry was still unused to this whole trusting others with his secrets thing but he was trying his hardest to move past his upbringing so he nodded in acceptance to Remus' request.

Sirius was not happy with this revelation either. His family had delved deeply into the dark arts in the last few centuries and the connection that Harry was describing was very sinister. "Harry, there may be

something that we can do in the mean time that can help you attempt to block out these visions.”

“What is it?” Harry said eagerly. He was willing to try almost anything to prevent himself from witnessing, or feeling as if he committed those atrocious acts.

“It’s a discipline called Occlumency. It allows you to block mental intrusions from Legilimency. I’m not sure if it will work on your connection but it should at least help out a bit.” Sirius said helpfully.

“Thanks. That would be great. I could use any help that you can give me with this nightmare.” Harry said honestly.

Hermione was squeezing Harry’s hand in support while he spoke with his godfather. “Perhaps I can ask my parents for some books on meditation too?”

“That’s a great idea Hermione. We were going to head over to your parent’s house to discuss some things anyway so we will make sure to fill them in and see if they have any books on meditation.” Sirius said enthusiastically. “Take care you two.”

“We will. Thanks Sirius.” The teens chorused together before signing off.

Sirius was chuckling at their eerie ability to finish sentences together. ‘One would think that they were an old married couple the way that they act sometimes’ he thought as he went up to the library to help Remus with his search and to pull those books on Occlumency and Legilimency for them.

Hermione turned to look at Harry to see how he was holding up. He seemed much better physically by the time that they got to the Room of Requirement but she was more concerned about his mental state right now. “Are you feeling better?” she asked while holding his hand.

“I am; thanks. I’m still a bit nervous about the whole connection thing but you know that already don’t you?”

"Yes, I just wanted to see if talking about it would help you. I think anyone would be more than a little nervous about having a connection to the Dark Lord."

"It helps to talk about it but I still don't like to. I'm getting better about it with your help though." Harry said warmly while holding Hermione's gaze.

Changing the subject, Hermione said "Can you tell me why Winky gave me a bog roll for my bag today just after lunch?"

Harry's countenance changed immediately. He was trying very hard not to laugh when he thought about what should be starting in various parts of the castle in the next few minutes. "Well, I sort of instigated a prank on some people that were bothering us." The smile on his face was in full bloom now.

Hermione found herself beginning to smile in response to the look on Harry's face. What ever it was, she was sure that it was major. "What did you do? And why do I need this roll?" she said while waving it around in front of her.

"Well, let's just say that it's worth a lot of gold because of how rare it is now." His smile had turned predatory as he thought about what people would be suffering soon.

"Okay, but what did you do?" Hermione cried in exasperation.

"Don't hate me but I had Dobby and your dad help with this too."

"What? My dad hates pranks!" the surprise was clear in her voice.

"Yes, well, he was actually doing this more for you than anything else. It was actually Dobby's idea and I ran with it from there. We even got the majority of the Hogwarts house elves to help too." Harry's voice held a pleading note in it as he was hoping to avoid getting into trouble with Hermione.

Her voice was increasing in sharpness as she asked for the third time "What did you do?"

"Have you ever heard of a polyethylene glycol solution?" when Hermione nodded no he continued. "Well, how familiar are you with the term Complete Colon Irrigation?" the smile was plastered on his face again and the mirth was evident in his voice.

"Oh my! You didn't?" seeing his grin become even larger she continued; "Who did you prank?"

"Well, most of the fourth year Slytherins, a few people from the other houses, Ron, the twins, Snape and Dumbledore. I'm not sure how many that we were successful with yet though." Harry said the last bit thoughtfully.

"Harry James Potter!" Hermione half shouted.

Harry cringed at the use of his full name and the tone in her voice.

"Thank you. You didn't have to, but thank you just the same." Hermione said earnestly before she leaned over and gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

Harry was very relieved when Hermione kissed his cheek instead of continuing to rail at him for his childish behavior. It was a mark of how much she had changed this year that she did not start berating him the minute he admitted to playing a prank on two teachers.

"When do you think it will begin happening?" she asked in a curious, yet eager, tone.

"Well," he glanced down at his watch before continuing, "It should have started by now. Everyone is affected a bit differently according to the directions but most people can't hold out that long." Harry said with glee.

"Should we go then or do you want to stay here for a while?"

"I think that we should head down to the lake and just take a walk. People will see us down there as usual so that won't be suspicious and we won't be around when things start to go awry."

"Okay. Let's get going then." She said as she stood and held her hand out to Harry.

On their way down the couple passed by the corridor leading to the Ravenclaw, dormitories and they had their first experience with the prank. Marietta Edgecombe was running up the steps towards them with a look of discomfort and beads of sweat running down her face.

Seeing an excellent opportunity, Harry stepped into her path and called out "Hello Marietta. Why are you in such a hurry? Is everything alright?"

Marietta was mortified. She was seconds from having an accident, she could feel the pressure building, and here was Harry Potter standing in front of her wanting to talk. Just as she was about to speak her colon decided that it had had enough and betrayed her wishes with a very loud wet squelching noise.

Not bothering with formalities, she gave a small shriek and dashed around them heading into the girls loo at the top of the steps. The effort putting into wrenching open the door caused another loud, and very wet, noise followed by a moan as she fought to maintain control. Her dignity was lost somewhere back in the hall and she never saw the satisfied smile on the face of The Boy Who Lived.

Continuing on their way to the main entrance Harry was humming merrily to himself. His Voldemort induced experience in the library temporarily forgotten; while he enjoyed the fruits of Dobby's plan silently wishing that it had been Malfoy that he had spotted instead of Marietta.

When they were down by the lake, safely away from eavesdroppers, Hermione smirked and said, "That was rather enjoyable wasn't it? Disgusting, funny even, but yet oddly satisfying."

"Yes, it was." Harry replied with a light laugh in his voice. "I only wish I could have seen Malfoy, Snape, or Dumbledore's reactions to the stuff. Can you imagine the shrieking from Malfoy, 'I spend more time grooming than Parvarti,' when he soils himself?"

"Ooh, I would love to have seen his face too. I just hope it happened around a very large group of people. He could use a good embarrassing moment; it's simply amazing how large his ego really is." Hermione said wistfully as she thought of watching Draco getting embarrassed in front of the entire Great Hall.

The two teens were coming up to the area near the Durmstrang ship when they noticed someone dive into the lake from the bow of the boat.

"Is he mad? That water must be absolutely freezing!" Harry declared.

Hermione had paused to watch Viktor Krum as he pulled out his wand and did a spell before diving underwater and disappearing from sight. "I think that he knows what the task is and now he is training." her voice held a note of concern as she watched the area where Krum had disappeared beneath the surface.

"Right, I guess that settles it then. What ever I have to do for the second task is in the lake and the egg must hold the details of the task." Harry had paused to gaze out into the middle of the lake a look of discomfort on his face.

"What's the matter?" Hermione asked as she came up next to him and leaned into his shoulder.

His response was low and mumbled but she was still able to hear his confession.

"I don't know how to swim. The Dursleys never sent me to lessons." he paused when Hermione stiffened at the mention of the Dursleys. "Can you teach me to swim in a month? I don't fancy drowning as it would put a definite crimp in my lifestyle."

"That will be easy." Hermione said reassuringly. "It's the staying underwater for a long time that worries me. Viktor is still down there and there is no way anyone can hold his or her breath for that long. We are going to have to find a spell or something for you to use too." her voice laced with concern.

"Well, look at the bright side." He paused when he saw her look of incredulity. "You get to learn some new stuff and see me in my swim trunks." Harry finished cheekily as he watched the blush blossom on her cheeks.

She stood up and stepped completely into his personal space. Her lips millimeters from his ear as she spoke in a sultry tone "Are you sure you could handle the thought of me in a bikini trying to teach you to swim?"

Harry's reaction was immediate. He went from smug to panic to eager in the span of a few seconds. While he was fighting for control of his blush, he did not notice that Hermione had slid her wand out of her forearm holder in her cloak.

With a deft flick of her wrist, she silently levitated some snow behind Harry. Grasping the snow in her free hand, she slowly slid her arm up rubbing his back as she went. "Perhaps you should cool off a bit before you get too worked up." Hermione said as she thrust the snow down the back of his jumper.

Harry let out an entirely too girly shriek as he leapt away from Hermione and started shaking his jumper to get the snow out.

When he finished hopping around trying to remove the snow, Hermione was howling in laughter at his antics. She stopped cold when she caught the look in his eyes. Letting out her own shriek she turned and sprinted towards the castle with Harry hot on her heels and laughing the entire time.

Two soaked teens entered the castle thirty minutes later. Their cheeks flushed from frolicking in the snow and a few stolen kisses thrown in for good measure.

The house elves were busier in the middle of the day for the first time in months and they loved every minute of it. Students, and a couple of teachers, were generating dirty laundry at a prodigious pace. It was obvious that quite a few people had failed to make it to the loo before the prank took effect.

The only person on the cleaning staff that was unhappy was Argus Filch. He had the unfortunate task of cleaning up a few messes where students could not quite make it to the loo in time and were obviously too embarrassed to come back and clean up the mess, lest someone connect it to them.

It was with some small amount of pleasure when Filch caught the Malfoy boy fleeing the scene of one such mess. "You!" Filch roared. "Befouling the castle and making more work for me! I'll teach you to a lesson you won't soon forget boy!" he yelled at Draco, spittle flying from the edges of his mouth he was so enraged.

Draco was in quite the quandary. He knew that he was about to have another accident unless he could get to the loo quickly. The caretaker was blocking his way and shouting at him but his discomfort was so great that he didn't register anything that Filch was shouting.

Disregarding the shouting caretaker Draco began to move towards the loo before it was too late.

"How dare you walk away from me boy!" Filch shouted as he grabbed Draco by the arm and spun him around.

The violent jerking motion caused a couple of things to happen. Draco was pulled off balance, causing him to fall into the caretaker just as he lost the little control he had and everything let loose. It was all over the two of them.

"YOU DISGUSTING LITTLE BEAST!" Filch howled as he threw Malfoy away from him. "That will be detention for a month with me, cleaning the castle without magic. Be down at my office at six tonight to begin your detention! Now get away from me before you make an even bigger mess."

Humiliated, Draco slunk the rest of the way to the Slytherin dormitories so he could take a shower and put on some fresh clothes. He never knew that he had been pranked and that he was the only one that had been caught by a member of the staff.

By the next morning, the majority of the school would think that it Malfoy had been making the messes all over the castle. The other people that were effected by the prank were not about to come forward claim anything, especially after they found out how bad Malfoy's punishment had been.

Harry Potter went to bed that evening very happy, thoughts of Malfoy scrubbing the castle without magic dancing in his head.

## Chapter 16: A dish best served cold.

Annabelle Granger came downstairs into the kitchen to grab a cup of tea and a spot of breakfast. When she entered the kitchen, she was surprised to find John, Remus, and Sirius already there talking.

She walked over to where everyone sat around the center island and kissed her husband on the cheek before sitting down. “Good morning. What’s the meeting about?”

The three men shared a look with each other and seemed to come to an understanding.

Sirius spoke for the group after gathering his thoughts for a couple of seconds. “We were talking about the Dursleys.”

A scowl forming on Annabelle’s face made Sirius realize that she was as upset about the situation as they were. With a small smile he continued in a slightly amused tone “You didn’t think that we were just going to let them get away with what they did to Harry now, did you?”

“I was beginning to wonder.” Annabelle answered. “Why now?”

“Because revenge is a dish best served cold and Dursley had gotten comfortable in his new environment.” Sirius replied, his voice hard.

“I’m in. What do you have planned for them?” Annabelle said with conviction.

All three men had a slightly shifty look about them and they were fidgeting in their seats.

“What? Did you three think that I wouldn’t approve? The Dursleys are a bunch of child abusers. They may not have hit Harry that often but the emotional abuse and neglect was enough in my book.” Annabelle stated heatedly.

Child abuse had always bothered her and if she was in a position to help, she would. The fact that Harry was going to be their

responsibility from now on made her want to see justice done even more.

"Oh. Cheers then. I was worried that you might be angry at us for going after them without telling you." John said in relief.

Annabelle reached out and grasped hands with Sirius and Remus before speaking. "You're all forgiven, unless you don't tell me what you did and why Remus here looks like he was beaten up pretty badly." Her gaze took in the black eye and split lip that he was sporting.

Three identical grins broke out on the men's faces. This time John spoke up first. "Do you remember those legal papers that the Dursleys signed?" Seeing his wife's nod yes, he continued.

"One of those forms was a power of attorney over them and their financial affairs. John finished with an evil grin.

"You didn't? Oh my. You sly dog!" Annabelle said with a look of glee. "Did you leave them anything?"

"We did. I had the accountants set up a trust fund for Harry and Dudley. They cannot touch them until they are twenty-five. The majority of the proceeds from the sale of their house and belongings went to Harry with Dudley getting the rest. They didn't have too much in the way of savings due to Dudley's school tuition. They don't have enough money to come back for a long while."

"Okay. Now is someone going to tell me why Remus looks like he was beaten up?"

"That's because I was." Remus replied, speaking for the first time. Seeing Annabelle's concerned look he continued before she could start asking a myriad of questions.

"Vernon actually attacked me when I showed up in Australia to tell him what was going on." The look of smug satisfaction didn't quite fit with the visible damage to his face.

"Well, I flew to Australia, Polyjuiced to look like Harry. Dobby got the hairs for the potion. Harry doesn't know what we did yet."

Remus finished.

"Oh. Are you going to tell him?" she asked.

"Eventually, we want him to settle in first." Sirius piped up from the other side of the table.

"Please continue then." the eager tone of her voice was simple to pick up to the group.

"When I arrived I grabbed a taxi from the airport to the Grunnings office in Melbourne. I asked the receptionist to page my uncle, Vernon Dursley. Let's just say that things went pear shaped fast from there."

Remus said as before he began to retell the events that happened in Australia.

Vernon Dursley was having a very good day, a good month even. Petunia had called that morning to say that she had finally found the perfect house with a beautiful view overlooking the city.

He had also closed a deal that morning for a large order of drills that made up his entire monthly quota in one fell swoop.

'Yes sir, life was definitely good. The weather was fantastic, business was booming, and they had found a house that was befitting of someone of their stature in upper class society.' Vernon thought to himself.

He was just thinking about taking a nice extra long lunch to celebrate when the receptionist rang his desk. "Vernon Dursley speaking." He answered in his slightly nasal tone.

"Mr. Dursley, you have a visitor up front."

"Thank you Madeline. I'll be right out." Vernon answered importantly. He figured that it must be one of the dentists coming by to finally set up the contract for the large orders that John Granger had set up for him.

When Vernon entered the reception area he found the receptionist talking to a young man whose back was to him.

He was stepping forward to introduce himself when he heard a voice that stopped him in his tracks. A voice that he thought he would never have to hear again.

Vernon couldn't help himself and thirteen years of frustration erupted. He reached out and spun his nephew around by the shoulder. "Boy! What are you doing here?" he demanded angrily.

"Hello uncle, nice to see you too. I came to drop off some paperwork for you and to see what our new house looks like. We are on a bit of a break at school right now and the headmaster said that I could come and visit, so here I am." Harry finished in a pleasant tone. "How are Aunt Petunia and Dudley doing? I haven't seen them since boarding school started."

Vernon was turning a nasty shade of puce, as he stood transfixed, staring at his freakish nephew. He got the shock of his life when the boy stepped up and hugged him, hard, before he could push the freak away.

In a whisper so quiet that only Vernon could hear him, Harry said "I want you to know that the house, and your possessions, were sold and I got the profit from it. In addition, there will not be any large contracts from Mr. Granger's friends. They signed up with your competition last week." He pulled away from the hug slowly to give the appearance of really missing his loving uncle.

With an inarticulate scream of rage, Vernon backhanded his nephew in the face as hard as he could. The force of the blow was so great that it knocked Harry into the glass coffee table, shattering it and sending shards of glass everywhere.

Harry curled up into a ball and cried out "Please uncle, I'm sorry. I promise that I won't do it again!" His cries went silent when a foot landed square in his chest, knocking the wind out of him.

The receptionist screamed which brought a number of people running into the room. Among the people that responded to the scream was the Managing Director for the Australian Branch of Grunnings.

Mr. Anderson took one look at what was going on and told his receptionist to call building security and the police. It took three people to pull Vernon off his beaten nephew before security arrived and took over. The boy on the floor couldn't have been more than fifteen and he looked to be a right mess. "Call an ambulance!" he barked to Madeline.

"Son, can you hear me?" Mr. Anderson said kindly to the boy curled up into a ball on the floor.

The boy flinched at the closeness of the voice before slowly uncurling himself. Mr. Anderson gasped a bit when he saw the look of fear in the child's eyes. "Don't worry we won't hurt you. Can you sit up? We need to get you out of the glass."

They helped Harry up and seated him on the couch as gently as they could.

By the time the paramedics arrived, the police already had Vernon in a lorry on his way to the station. The additional charge of resisting arrest had been added to the assaulting a minor violation.

Harry received medical treatment on site for the worst of his injuries. Afterwards, he was transported to the hospital to have his wounds tended and evidence taken for the police report. The detective that interviewed him was very thorough and Remus was thankful for the very detailed letter from Harry and Hermione that spelled out everything that had happened to him since he was little. It allowed him to play his role as Harry to perfection.

By the time that the interview was over, the detective was assuring him that he would never have to see his relatives again and that they

were going to do their best to ensure that his uncle has to spend some time in an Australian jail.

They kept him in the hospital overnight and Dobby had been a godsend. He had kept delivering Polyjuice Potion every hour to maintain the charade.

It was a full week later before the local law enforcement had gathered enough evidence to proceed with the trial. They video taped Harry's deposition because he had to get back to school in England and he didn't feel comfortable facing his uncle again.

Mr. Anderson had taken things a step further and fired Vernon Dursley and gave Petunia one week to vacate the corporate apartments. Without enough funds to purchase a house, Petunia had to start looking for a job and Dudley had to transfer to the local public school where he would learn quickly that he was no longer the biggest fish in the pond.

Remus finished the tale of his adventure as Harry and Annabelle enveloped him in a hug.

"That was a brave, but very stupid, thing that you did Remus. I don't think anyone can thank you enough for what you have done for Harry." Annabelle said with tears in her eyes.

John and Sirius both wore grim expressions as Remus filled in all of the little details of his ordeal. John had clapped Remus on the shoulder, to overcome with emotions to speak, in thanks.

Sirius understood a bit better than the Grangers did about why Remus was willing to go to the lengths that he did to ensure that Harry would never have to see the Dursleys again. He had felt like he had failed Harry as his godfather that fateful night and he was sure that Remus had similar feelings of remorse for not checking up on Harry when he was just a child.

The two best friends shared a look of understanding. They both knew that they would do anything to ensure Harry's safety and happiness

and that this was just one small thing to make up for thirteen long years of suffering.

## Chapter 17: A dark day in the lake.

There was a lone figure out on the snow-covered grounds, wrapped in a cloak to protect against the biting wind that blew in over the Great Lake. The ground around the figure was a muddy brown, slushy mess, as if the person had been pacing back and forth in worry.

Harry had taken his egg into the bath with him on Cedric's advice and he did not like the clue one bit. He knew what he would miss the most and he was trying to figure out how to keep Hermione safe. There was no way he wanted her to be involved in the second task other than her helping him to prepare. To prevent her from being taken was the problem and he couldn't figure out how to stop it.

People died in this stupid tournament and he would be damned if he would let her be put in danger because of someone's desire to see him dead. He was so wrapped up in his thoughts that he almost didn't hear her come up behind him.

Hermione had been distracted all morning. She had been getting waves of emotions from their bond and as soon as her class had ended, she had gone off in search of Harry. It took her almost twenty minutes to find him and when she arrived, the telltale signs of his worry were readily apparent.

"Hey, are you okay?" she asked him softly as she came to stand next to him.

"Not at all." He admitted scuffing the ground with the toe of his right boot. "I know what I have to do for the second task next month."

Harry's voice had a hint of desperation in it that pulled at Hermione's heart. "What is it?" she whispered. She knew that it had to be bad if it was affecting him this way.

"They are going to take something important to me and put it in the Great Lake. If I can't retrieve it in an hour its gone forever." he said bitterly.

Hermione was stunned. 'What kind of society would allow someone, or something, to be put in danger like that for a tournament' she thought angrily. "You think that they are going to put me at the bottom of the lake don't you?" her voice was low, full of worry, as she thought of all of the unpleasant things that could happen at the bottom of the lake.

He nodded yes to her question and pulled her into a hug filled with desperation and fear. "I won't let them take you. They will have to go through me first." he said with steel in his voice.

She could feel the propensity for violence radiating from Harry and it scared and thrilled her at the same time. She knew that he would do anything to protect her, as she would for him, but this was her first real experience with these feelings.

The prank was just mild revenge for people making her upset. This task could conceivably put her life in as much danger as his had been since his name came out of the Goblet of Fire.

"What can we do?" Hermione asked him softly while rubbing his back, her face buried in his shoulder. It was an odd time to realize it, but Harry had gotten taller during the term. Her head used to rest on his shoulder, now he was a good two inches taller based upon where her cheek came to rest naturally.

"I don't know. I sent Hedwig off to Sirius and Remus this morning asking for advice." Harry said while leaning his head down to rest upon the top of hers.

"Do you think we should talk to Professor McGonagall?" came her muffled reply from his shoulder.

Harry paused for a moment before answering. He wasn't sure that he trusted his head of house fully. Yes, she had helped him a bit more this term. Professor McGonagall had been aware of the type of home that he was imprisoned in all of those years ago. Yet, she still had not checked up on him. He said simply, "I'm not sure that I trust her."

Hermione knew why he felt this way. They had spent many evenings talking about his childhood. She correctly figured this was about the Professor's role in not checking up on him as he grew up.

Making up her mind she said, "I know you don't really trust her, for a very good reason, but do you think we should ask for her help anyway?"

"Perhaps; I just don't know what she will do and that bothers me. This is your safety we are talking about." Harry said in a concerned tone.

"I love you too much to see you hurt in some meaningless tournament."

She was fighting back tears from his declaration and his emotions that she could feel roiling within him. "I know; and I love you too. We will do what you feel comfortable with, I trust you Harry."

"Come on, we should head back to the castle. I have runes next and you have Arithmancy and I need to get my books." Harry said, surprising Hermione that he had her schedule memorized.

The truth of the matter was that Harry had memorized her schedule and the most likely spots where trouble could occur in the halls. He had quietly watched everyone in the halls that she encountered, making a mental note whenever one of the people on his list came near her.

He knew it was only a matter of time before someone tried something. She was a target because she was dating him. He knew it would be worse if people knew the true extent of their relationship, one that he was still coming to grips with himself. Harry silently vowed to do his best to prevent anything from happening if he could, anything.

Later that evening they were sitting in the Gryffindor common room talking with Neville and Ginny about the second task.

"What do you guys know about breathing underwater?" Harry asked his friends.

Neville looked lost in thought while Ginny had an amused expression on her face. Not knowing why Ginny looked like she was relishing something Harry asked her “What’s that look for?”

If possible, her smile grew even wider before she answered. “Does this have to do with Hermione trying on that;” she turned to face Hermione and asked, “What did you call it again?”

“A bikini.” She answered her red haired friend, the blush creeping up her cheeks.

“Oh yes, did this have anything to do with Hermione trying on a bikini the other day in the girls loo?” Ginny asked as innocently as she could, her eyes wide to add to the look.

Harry was blushing almost as bad as Hermione by this point. Doing his best to reign in his mounting blush he replied, “Yes. She was teaching me how to swim for the second task. I have to go into the Great Lake to retrieve something.” he purposefully kept his answer vague. He did not want them to know that Hermione was probably what the judges would want to take from him.

Neville piped up “What’s a bikini?”

His question caused Hermione to go red again. “Trust me mate, you’ll love it when you see Ginny in one.” Harry answered cheekily causing Ginny’s face to match her hair.

“Harry!” Hermione squealed at his answer. “Would you like me to tell them about your reaction to the first time that you saw me in my bikini?” her voice was innocent, yet playful, and it sent a blush up Harry’s cheeks that rivaled Ginny’s hair.

Harry knew he wouldn’t be forgetting that moment anytime soon. It was a memory he had planned to use to power his next Patronus. “Nope.” he managed to squeak out, much to the amusement to the others.

Getting things back to the task Hermione said "Do either of you know anything other than the bubble head charm to allow Harry to breathe underwater for an hour or more?"

Neville looked as if a light bulb had gone off inside of his head. He quickly asked, "Does it have to be a spell?"

"The only thing we know is that Harry has to go into the lake to retrieve something." Hermione said helpfully.

"There's gillyweed." Neville said simply. "It allows the person that consumes it to breathe underwater for a time depending upon how large a dose you take."

"That's brilliant Neville!" Hermione said happily, causing the boy to blush bright red at the praise.

"How much do you think I'll need for an hour underwater?" Harry asked softly.

"One hour?" Neville clarified. Seeing Harry's nod in the affirmative he speculated, "I think more than a handful but you should probably get some and test it first to be safe."

"Thanks, Neville. I'll do that." Harry said with relief in his voice.

After Neville and Ginny had headed off to bed, Harry and Hermione were the only two left in the common room. "Dobby." Harry called out softly.

There was a small pop and the excitable house elf appeared before the two teens. Pulled up above his knees were mismatched socks." What can Dobby do for you?"

"Can you get me enough gillyweed to practice with before the second task? I want to make sure that I'm comfortable with using that stuff before the task." Harry said to his tiny friend.

"Of course, sir. I will retrieve some for you immediately." and with a pop the little elf was gone again.

Harry paused for a second before turning to Hermione and asking in a very confused tone of voice “Is it me or does Dobby sound different to you too?”

Hermione thought back to all of her recent encounters with their elves and realized that Harry was right. She had noticed something before but had put it out of her mind with all of the stresses of the tournament weighing on her. “Now that you mention it, I did notice something different about both of them a while back but I guess that it just slipped my mind.”

“Hmm, I think that I like it. They don’t sound like a couple of uneducated kids anymore. I’m glad but I wonder what brought about the change?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know. Why don’t you just ask him when he returns?” Hermione replied simply.

“I guess I will. I just hope that I don’t offend him or something.”

There was another pop and Dobby reappeared holding a very large jug of what appeared to be slimy balls of gillyweed. It looked disgusting and Harry was beginning to wonder if he would be able to chew the stuff.

“Thanks Dobby. Where did you get it?” Harry asked while pointing to the jar of gillyweed that Dobby had set on the table in front of them.

Dobby had a very sheepish grin on his face and he was shuffling his feet. He said with a tone that brooked no argument, “Perhaps it is better if you don’t know sir.” What Dobby wasn’t telling them was that he had taken all of Professor Snape’s private stores of gillyweed and replaced it with sauerkraut since they looked very similar.

Harry gave Dobby a long look before deciding that it probably was for the best that he didn’t know. “Okay Dobby. Nevertheless, could you tell me why you and Winky sound so different now? We like the change, we are just curious.”

"Mistress Hermione's parents have been giving us lessons in the evenings and we are giving them lessons on the magical world in return." Dobby said happily.

"Oh. That's great Dobby!" Hermione said enthusiastically. "Would you say hello to them for me when you see them next please?"

"It would be my pleasure, Miss." Dobby said with a slight bow before he popped away to return to whatever task he had been performing before they called him.

Sirius and Remus were just about to sit down for a late night snack when Hedwig arrived in the kitchen of number twelve.

"Hello Hedwig." Remus called out to the bird while extending his arm for her to land on. Once she had settled he untied the letter attached to her leg and carried her over to the perch in the corner that they kept stocked with owl treats and fresh water.

Remus quickly read the letter and handed it over to Sirius. When he had finished reading it too Remus said, "I think that we should go visit Annabelle and John so we can discuss this with them as it involves Hermione too."

"I'll call them to make sure they aren't busy." Sirius said as he headed over to make a quick floo call.

A few seconds later he came back into the kitchen and said "Let's go; they were just having tea and said it was a good time to visit."

They took turns using the floo to get to the Grangers. After everyone had settled down at the kitchen table with their tea Remus handed the letter over and waited for the Grangers to read it.

"NO!" Annabelle shouted. "There is no way that I am allowing my daughter to be a part of this tournament. It's bad enough that they are making Harry participate but to force him to rescue Hermione from the lake is insane!" she finished furiously.

"Calm down love. Is there anything that we can do?" John asked Remus and Sirius while patting Annabelle's back.

"You could send a letter stating that to the Headmaster." Remus said after a few moments thought. "I'm not sure what good it will do though. He has a long history of doing what he wants regardless of other's wishes."

"Do we have any legal standing to prevent this from happening?" Annabelle asked in a hopeful tone.

Remus' face darkened at this question before he answered. "I'm afraid not. Muggles, non-magical people, have no rights in the magical world. In fact, up until a couple of years ago it was even worse. Arthur Weasley was finally able to get a Muggle protection act enforced. That basically prevented magical people from interfering in the day to day lives of non magical people."

The Grangers were both looking a bit outraged and upset at the same time. "How can they do that? Our daughter is a witch and I'm sure that there are plenty of others in our situation too." Annabelle said heatedly.

This time Sirius spoke up. "Well, in many ways our society is still very Victorian and many of our laws date from that era too. Wizards and Witches live longer, on average just over 120 years, so our laws are slower to change. If I'm not mistaken, Harry got a warning for underage magic use two years ago from a law that was laid down in the 1870's."

"I'm not sure that I like what I'm hearing about the magical world." John said in resignation. "Are all magical communities like this or are some more modern in their views and laws?"

Remus answered this question because for the last decade Sirius had been incarcerated." Some countries are better, similar to how some countries are more modern than others are. The North American Ministry for Magic is one of the most forward thinking because of how young their magical government is in comparison to the ones in Europe. However, they have some similar issues because

of magical life spans. The biggest difference is the size of their country. The United States and Canada are enormous and can hide quite a few magical communities with no one being any wiser.”

“Do you think that we should consider moving out of the country and taking the kids with us?” Annabelle asked.

“Part of me wants you to do just that while another part wants you to stay here for selfish reasons.” Remus said while Sirius nodded in agreement.

“Would the kids get as good of a magical education outside of Britain? I’ve only ever heard Hermione talking about the other two major European schools. Surely the North Americans have something equivalent?” John asked the two wizards.

“Well, the other European schools are probably out. Harry is well known there too. I haven’t been back in the magical world long enough to put together any thoughts on what the schools are like in the Americas.” Sirius replied.

Remus piped up with his opinion on the matter “I’ve been to the Salem Magical Academy while traveling in the United States. It’s about on par with Beauxbatons in terms of its facilities but its classes are about the same. The classes there are as good as Hogwarts in some areas, worse in some, and better in others.”

“Is it that hard to transfer to another magical school? It’s very easy in the non magical world but there are significantly more schools to choose from.” John said curiously.

“I’m not sure. I don’t know of anyone that has ever transferred before. I do know that some families choose to home school their children and others go into quasi apprenticeships instead of traditional schooling.” Remus said, drawing on his experience as an educator.

“I know that my family used to hire tutors for some children but most of us either went to Hogwarts or Durmstrang.” Sirius said helpfully.

"Do you think that we can hire some tutors this summer and see if the children would prefer that to regular schooling?" Annabelle asked everyone.

"I think that we could teach them a few things ourselves." Remus said while flicking his thumb indicating that Sirius would help teach.

With the beginnings of a plan in place, the adults spent the rest of the evening discussing various differences in the two worlds.

Hermione had received the letter from her parents to the Headmaster stating that she was not to be involved in the second task. She had made a copy and given it to Professor McGonagall to deliver for her. The look on her professor's face was one of pity and understanding and it did nothing to bolster her spirits.

Now that they knew what the second task entailed it seemed that time seemed to speed up. The weeks flew by and now the task was upon them.

Harry had become extremely tense over the last couple of days. He was constantly looking over their shoulders to make sure that the teachers wouldn't corner Hermione and sprite her away. He did not believe that Professor Dumbledore would honor the note sent by Hermione's parents.

It was during a break in between classes when someone finally pushed Harry too far. Malfoy and his goons were being their usual idiotic selves, picking on people in the halls. Harry had been on his way to meet Hermione after class when the trio had turned their bullying attention towards her.

"Well, look what we have here." Draco drawled as he stepped in front of Hermione, preventing her from reaching the steps down to the Great Hall.

"Go away Malfoy." Hermione said scathingly to the blond haired boy.

"Now that isn't any way to talk to your betters you filthy little Mudblood. Perhaps we should teach you some proper manners." Draco said with a sneer.

The three of them were all facing Hermione and not paying attention to their surroundings. If they were, they might have noticed Harry Potter stalking up behind them, fury etched on his youthful face.

Harry had his wand in his hand, when Malfoy took a step towards Hermione he reacted much the same way as when Ron accosted her. He had stepped to the side of the hallway to prevent him from accidentally hitting Hermione.

His first spell banished Malfoy into the wall at such a high rate of speed that there was a sickening crunching sound when he hit, knocking him unconscious in the process.

Before Crabbe could turn around Harry had hit him with a stunner to the back, causing him to fall face down. The crack of Crabbe's nose and jaw breaking when he hit the floor was audible from ten feet away.

Goyles' first, and only, mistake was enough to ensure him a stay in the hospital wing with his friends. He had stepped towards Crabbe when he fell rather than turning towards their attacker.

Harry did not hesitate; his third spell of the encounter was another banishing charm. Its power, coupled with Goyle having his back to him, sent the large boy flying face first into the alcove to the side of the hall. He crashed into the suit of armor with such force that it blew apart, sending pieces of metal all over the hall while burying him beneath the chest plate.

The entire encounter had lasted less than fifteen seconds and it left the three Slytherin students bloody and broken on the floor. Not a single spell had been uttered aloud the entire time.

Stepping over Crabbe's fallen body, Harry said to Hermione, "Are you okay?"

Hermione was breathing heavily. She had felt the cold determination of Harry's emotions come through their bond right before he attacked. She had not seen, or heard, him come up behind Malfoy and his two goons. "I'm fine, thanks to you. Perhaps we should get going before someone comes along and finds you here." Hermione answered with a slight tremble in her voice.

She was a bit shocked at how violently Harry had reacted but at the same time, it made her feel safe. He had promised that he would do anything he could to protect her. Hermione knew that she could probably handle any one of her attackers in a one on one situation. Three against one was definitely more than she would have been able to tackle.

For his part, Harry was extremely glad that Hermione wasn't hurt. He felt that it was long past due for Malfoy and his cronies to learn that bigotry and attacking people would no longer be tolerated.

Dumbledore, and the majority of the Wizarding world, did not seem to want to make sure that there were consequences for acting a certain way. 'Why keep tolerating behavior that would land most people in serious trouble without issuing some type of punishment?' Harry pondered.

Turning the other cheek only went so far. If you gave people enough chances, they were just going to think that they were allowed to behave a certain way and walk all over you.

Harry was done turning the other cheek. Malfoy and his thugs were just the first to feel the consequences for their actions but he was sure that they wouldn't be the last.

There was no one in the hallway to witness the confrontation, person, or portrait, and for that, Harry was thankful. He did not want to have to deal with the reactions from anyone that would have seen what had happened right now.

The young couple walked hand in hand down to the Great Hall to eat their lunch and to be seen by the teachers and other students. They

wanted to be in a very public place when the three morons were discovered.

It was about ten minutes later when a fifth year Slytherin prefect came running into the Great Hall to speak with Professor Snape.

"Excuse me sir, Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle are in the hospital wing. The girl told her Head of House, "No one knows what happened but they are in pretty bad shape."

Without saying a word, Severus Snape got up from the head table and strode out of the Great Hall towards the hospital wing. He was sure that Potter was involved in this somehow and he sent a glare at the boy on his way out.

They spent the rest of their day wandering around the grounds and talking about non-tournament related things to keep Harry's mind off the upcoming task.

They went to bed that evening a bit worried about what the morning would bring.

Harry awoke sometime around six in the morning but he couldn't figure out why. Something wasn't right; he just couldn't put his finger on what was bothering him. Not being able to feel Hermione's emotions, he guessed that she was still asleep. They had stayed up rather late talking the night before.

He decided to wait in the common room for her to get up so they could go down for a light breakfast before the second task began.

After about thirty minutes, Ginny came down from the girls dormitories.

"Good morning Harry. Are you waiting for Hermione to come down?" Ginny asked him as she took the seat across from him.

"I don't think that she is up yet. We were up late talking but I wanted to go to breakfast with her. You don't have to wait for us. We will meet you down there." Harry replied.

"Are you sure?" seeing his nod, Ginny decided to go ahead and go down to the Great Hall for breakfast before Ron showed up and ate everything in sight.

Harry watched Ginny head out the portrait hole and head down for breakfast. Realizing that he was still tired he decided to lie down on the couch to wait for Hermione to wake up.

The next thing Harry knew was that Dobby was roughly shaking him. "Master Harry must hurry down to the Great Lake. The task is about to begin and you must rescue Mistress Hermione!" Dobby said while wringing his hands.

"What! I've been here all morning and Hermione never came down. What happened?" Harry said while sprinting up to his dormitory to retrieve his swim trunks and gillyweed.

He was furious. 'How did Dumbledore get Hermione to participate in the task?' He dressed quickly and realized that he was going to miss the start of the task if he did not get down there fast. Seeing no other option, Harry threw open the window in the room and hopped onto his Firebolt, pushing it to its maximum so he would get to the lake in time.

The crowd was getting antsy for the second task to begin. The problem was that the fourth champion had not arrived yet.

Just as Dumbledore was about to announce the start of the task he noticed a spec in the sky getting larger fast. It was Harry Potter making his way down to the lake on his broom. Distress and anger were clearly visible on his face by the time he was close enough for Dumbledore to see it clearly.

Trying to avoid a nasty confrontation before the task began, Dumbledore announced, "Let the task begin. Champions you have one hour to retrieve what you will miss most from the bottom of the lake."

The other three champions dove into the water immediately. Cedric and Fleur used the Bubble Head Charm and Krum did a partial transfiguration, turning his upper body into that of a shark.

Tossing his broom to Neville, Harry pulled out some gillyweed and stepped over to the edge of the platform. He shot a murderous glance at Dumbledore and said, "This isn't over. If anything happens to her while she is down there you won't like the consequences." stuffing a large chunk of gillyweed into his mouth he dove into the water.

Rita Skeeter was absolutely beside herself in glee. Harry Potter had just threatened Albus Dumbledore in front of dozens of witnesses! She began to put together the beginnings of her front-page story in her head as she waited with everyone else for the champions to complete the task.

Harry felt the familiar sensation of gills forming on his neck and his hands and feet turning into flippers once he had swallowed the gillyweed. Diving deeper, he swam out towards the center of the lake to where he knew that they would be keeping the hostages.

He skirted around the grindylows and dove deeper, following the ridgeline down towards the singing he recognized from his egg. He didn't know how long he had been in the water searching for the merpeople's village because his watch had broken when he forgot to cast the water proofing charm on it in his haste to get to Hermione in time.

The lake was huge and it was not easy to find the village. If Harry could have screamed, he would have. He knew that he was running out of time and the clue was very clear that he would loose her if he did not rescue her within an hour.

Just as he crested a rise on the bottom of the lake, he noticed that the plant life cleared out and he could see a village below him. In the center of the village were four posts but they were empty. In a panic, Harry swam up to them and began looking for any sign of Hermione.

His heart was hammering in his chest as he frantically searched for her. He was about to head to another area of the village and begin

searching when he caught sight of a black cloak floating limply near the doorway to one of the huts.

Putting on a burst of speed, he swam over to the entrance to the hut and blasted the door off its hinges. The sight that greeted him would stay with him until his dying day. Hermione was lying on the earthen floor of the hut, eyes closed. She looked deathly pale in the low light at the bottom of the lake.

Two very large mermen stopped Harry at spear point as he rushed towards her. "You are too late the hour has come and gone, return to the surface human!" the merman on the right said in a harsh tone.

The merman on the left had been backing away slowly from the angry wizard in front of him. He could feel the power beginning to radiate from the wizard and it made him fear for his life. Trying to get his comrade's attention he called out "Let him take the girl with him. There is no harm in letting them go."

"NO! She stays here. The elder said that she would come by later to retrieve her." The first guard spoke heatedly.

Harry had trouble following the conversation but he understood the gist of it. The guard that was backing away seemed to want to let him take Hermione with him. The other one was intent upon keeping her down here until the elder showed up or something.

His chance for escape came when the angry guard turned his attention away for a moment to retort.

It was over before the guard knew what had happened. One second of inattention would cost him his life.

Harry's silent Severing Curse struck the merman across the torso, separating his body into two parts that floated in the now red stained water. The shock was still plainly clear on his face.

The guard that had been backing away from the moment the angry wizard blasted the door open realized that said wizard was now pointing his wand at him and the tip was glowing faintly. Not wanting

to meet the same fate as his foolish partner, the guard dropped his spear and raised his hands while continuing to back as far away as possible.

Harry slowly swam over to Hermione, never taking his eyes off the remaining guard, and began to pull her out of the tiny hut. He paused to take another dose of gillyweed when he was clear of the village. Then he swam as if the hounds of hell were on his tail.

He headed for the shallows, dragging Hermione's limp body behind him. Worry still burned in his chest because he was outside of the one-hour time limit. The water was getting lighter now and he knew that he was getting closer to the platform where help awaited.

When he reached the edge of the platform, he gratefully hoisted Hermione up into the waiting arms of Remus Lupin. Harry had to wait for another five minutes for his gills to recede before he could safely get out of the water.

He pushed aside a couple of people to get to where Hermione was being tended to by Madam Poppy Pomfrey. He was relieved when he heard her voice.

"Where is Harry?" Hermione asked; the desperation was easily detectable in her voice.

Stepping into the medical area he said "I'm right here love." and he pulled her into a hug. The enormity of what he had just done hit him now that he was holding her safe in his arms again and he began to shake.

"Oh Harry!" she cried into his shoulder as he held her close. "I don't know how I ended up in the lake. I went to bed last night and the next thing I know I'm in Remus' arms and you are still in the water!" she sobbed harder.

Remus Lupin had watched the entire exchange between Harry and Hermione. He knew that the two teens were definitely in love and that they had tried their hardest to prevent Hermione from ending up at the bottom of the lake. He wanted answers to her questions as well

and he was in a position to get some of them answered. Making up his mind, he strode from the tent after patting them on the shoulder and went to find Professor McGonagall.

"Hello Minerva." Remus said coldly as he stepped up to his former co-worker.

Slightly taken aback by the tone in his voice she replied "Hello Remus. What can I do for you?"

"You can tell me how Hermione Granger ended up at the bottom of the lake against her parents wishes." his voice was just as cold as the water in the lake.

"The judges deemed her to be the thing that Mr. Potter would miss the most so she was taken from her dormitory while she was sleeping and placed into an enchanted sleep before being put down there." Minerva replied in a matter of fact tone.

"Why didn't you stop Albus from taking Ms. Granger per her parent's request?" Remus snapped.

"You know that muggles don't have any say in our world Remus. The headmaster acts in loco parentis for all muggle born students during the school year." McGonagall replied testily.

"And that is enough for you to go against the express written instructions of her parents, and I'm sure her own wishes!" Remus fumed. "This isn't over. I am very disappointed in you Minerva and that is nothing compared to what Harry is going to feel." Fearing that he would say something that he would regret in his anger, he spun around and left the teachers area.

Neither adult noticed the small water beetle that was perched on Remus' jacket as it flew off towards Hogsmeade.

## Chapter 18: The longest day.

Harry and Hermione were sitting in the middle of the Quidditch pitch clinging to each other tightly. Both were seeking comfort from the ordeal that was the second task of the Tri Wizard Tournament. They were so distraught that they had left the Champions Area before the announcing of the scores.

Hermione's trauma came from the fact that she had no recollection of the event at all until she awoke in the arms of Remus Lupin. She remembered going to bed the night before but she did not know how she had ended up in the lake. Someone had done something to her while she slept and then transported her to the lake. The only thing that she could figure was that it was either Professor McGonagall or Headmaster Dumbledore, or the two of them. The result was that she no longer felt safe in Gryffindor Tower; or Hogwarts for that matter, and she was deeply troubled by this fact.

Harry was trying to come to grips with the fact that he had killed someone to protect Hermione. His belief that the whole situation was avoidable drove his guilt. If the clue in the egg had said that she would have been returned after the one-hour time limit, rather than being lost to him forever, he would not have taken the merman's life.

He felt that the tournament organizers were to blame for this and that if they didn't mean for him to take the clue literally they could have at least told him beforehand.

What Harry did not feel bad about was protecting Hermione. He would do it again in a heartbeat if that were what it would take to keep her safe.

'What kind of people would put someone in that type of situation?' he thought sadly. The only conclusion that he could come up with was that those people were sick, twisted, individuals that got off on tormenting others.

They were still holding on to each other when Remus finally found them. Sighing deeply, he walked over and sat down next to them for

a few minutes before finally speaking in a voice laced with concern. "Are you two okay?"

The two teens looked up at Remus, the stress of the morning's events plainly visible on their tear stained faces. Hermione spoke first, her voice quavering. "Thank you for staying with me while Harry was still in the lake. I don't know what I would have done had you not been there."

"I'm glad that I could help. Are you two going to be okay?" he asked in a quiet voice.

Hermione nodded yes but she had a far off look in her eyes as she re-lived her part in the day's events.

Harry's response was much quicker. He gave a curt nod in the affirmative and held Remus' gaze for a few moments before looking away.

The three of them continued to sit in silence together, each drawing some measure of comfort from the other's presence.

Remus was keeping a silent vigil for the two teens, hoping that his being there would help them feel more secure. He did not know what horrors that Harry had faced down in the lake but he knew that it was bad.

The look of panic on Harry's face had been terrible to see. It lessened somewhat when he had found Hermione safe, but upset. It now resided in his eyes and posture, especially when surrounded by large crowds.

Remus had seen how Harry had been scanning the crowd constantly looking for threats to Hermione as they left the stands. Feeling that if he didn't say something to Harry about his fears they would consume him in his desire to protect Hermione.

With a small sigh, Remus broke the silence. "You did a great job today Harry. It is impossible to protect someone all of the time." Seeing Harry's look of guilt he quickly continued.

"It was not your fault that Hermione ended up in the Great Lake. If you try to protect her all of the time you will suffocate her and damage your relationship."

His last words seemed to get through to them. Hermione was sitting up a bit straighter and Harry's posture had relaxed a little.

Hermione shifted herself so that her back was against Harry's chest, allowing him to wrap his arms around her stomach. She took a few calming breaths and said "Harry, what happened down in the lake?"

With a quick flick of his wand, Remus put up a few wards for privacy. What ever happened down in that lake was big and he did not want anyone hearing any of this conversation.

Harry tensed briefly at the question but he relaxed as he felt the reassuring emotions from Hermione as she softly stroked his hands.

His voice was as quiet as a gentle breeze when he finally spoke. "I fell asleep on the couch in the common room while I was waiting for you to come down for breakfast. The next thing I know is Dobby is shaking me awake, telling me that the task is about to start."

He paused a moment to let his heart rate calm down before he continued. "I flew down to the lake on my broom as fast as I could. When I arrived; Dumbledore took one look at me and announced the start of the task."

Harry took another deep, calming, breath before continuing. "I ate some gillyweed and dove into the lake right after snapping at Dumbledore. In my haste, I forgot to charm my watch so it broke. I didn't see any of the other champions and in my panic to get to you I got a bit disoriented." Harry's heart was pounding now as he relived the event in his mind as he re-told it.

In a whisper, he said, "By the time that I found the village you were gone."

Harry had to take deep, gulping, breaths of air to calm down. The thought of what he found and what he had done weighed heavily upon him.

Hermione could feel the distress coming off Harry in waves. Hoping to calm him down she said soothingly. "Hey, everything worked out; you were able to reach me and bring me back." She pulled his arms tighter around her, leaned back, and gave him a soft kiss on his jaw.

Feeling a bit nervous about telling the next part Harry paused for a few seconds to enjoy the feeling of having Hermione safe in his arms. After a few seconds where no one moved or said anything, Harry continued speaking. "I saw a cloak floating next to the entrance to one of their huts just off to the side of where you must have been tied up."

Harry's grip had tightened and he drew her closer to his chest before he continued speaking again. "I blasted the door open and..." he could not bring himself to say what he saw but as the images sprang into his mind, the tears began to pour from his eyes. They ran down his cheeks unchecked and splashed into Hermione's hair.

He stopped trying to fight the tears, the floodgates opened, and he began to sob harder while rocking back and forth with Hermione in his arms.

Hermione was worried now. 'What had happened in that hut under the lake?' she thought. Slowly, so as not to disturb Harry, she turned around and pulled him to her chest while gently rubbing his back.

Remus was positively alarmed at this point. What ever had happened down there had really shaken Harry up badly. With a quick flick of his wand, he put up a few extra wards, including a notice me not so they would not be disturbed.

"Harry, it's okay. You don't have to continue if you don't feel up to it." Hermione said softly as she stroked his hair.

After a few more minutes, Harry had finally composed himself enough to finish the tale. He did not move from his position on Hermione's lap so his voice was slightly muffled by her robes.

He whispered so softly that they had to strain to hear his voice. "When I entered the hut I thought that you were dead."

Hermione and Remus both gasped at this revelation. Before either of them could speak, Harry continued with the retelling of the events in the lake.

"You were half floating just off of the floor of the hut with your eyes closed and your mouth open slightly." Harry's voice had taken on a haunted tone as he spoke. "When your body came to rest on the floor I began to swim towards you only to be stopped at spear point by two mermen. They told me that the time limit had passed and that I had to leave you behind for the elder or something." Tears were flowing down his cheeks but he was making no effort to wipe them away.

Hermione was crying silently in horror for what Harry must have gone through seeing her like that. She knew that it would have torn her up inside if she had been in his place.

"One of the guards was trying to tell the other one to let me take you but he refused to listen." Harry sat up and looked into Hermione's eyes pleadingly. "I couldn't leave you down there."

"I know, and thank you." Hermione said solemnly and with complete understanding, as she looked right back into his eyes while pushing feelings of love and gratitude to him through their bond.

Feeling Hermione's emotions helped steel Harry's resolve to continue with the re-telling of events. "In my grief and anger I cursed the guard closest to you and turned my wand to the remaining guard. He dropped his spear and began backing away from you." Harry paused when he finished speaking to take a few deep breaths to regain some semblance of control over his emotions.

Remus was shocked as Harry informed them of what happened in the hut. He was positive that Harry had killed the first guard without

hesitation when he sensed that the guard was not going to let him take Hermione with him.

"I grabbed your arm and backed out of the hut once the guard was far enough away. When we were clear of the village, I took a little more gillyweed and swam as hard as I could back to the platform. You know everything that happened after that." Harry finished speaking, completely drained physically and mentally from re-counting the horror that was the second task.

Making a split decision, Remus stood up from his spot on the grass. "Stay here please. I'll be back in a bit. I need to go up to the castle."

The two teens nodded in response to Remus' request and then watched him head up towards the castle.

When Remus reached the castle, he headed off towards the teachers lounge, hoping to find Minerva McGonagall. He knocked upon the door to the staff room and poked his head inside.

'That's odd.' he thought to himself when he didn't find a single staff member present. Someone was usually in here most times of the day, even on weekends.

He checked his watch and noticed that it was lunchtime. Figuring that he would be able to find a teacher in the Great Hall, Remus began the trek back down.

The entrance hall was full of people milling about and the familiar clatter of utensils rang from the Great Hall. Families were in attendance for the remainder of the day because the task took place on a Saturday morning.

The Great Hall was full of students and their families. Since the noise level was so high, no one paid any attention to the former Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor walking up the side of the hall towards the staff table.

Remus kept his eyes firmly fixed upon the headmaster as he approached him. "Albus, can we talk privately for a moment?" It was phrased as a question but Dumbledore knew that it was not a request.

"Of course; why don't we use the anteroom?" Dumbledore said while excusing himself from the staff table.

Once they were inside Dumbledore asked, "What can I do for you Remus?"

"I'm actually here for Harry and Hermione's benefit." Remus replied coolly.

Dumbledore was taken aback for a moment. He did not think that anyone would confront him on that situation, especially not the same day that it happened. "I see." he said slowly, allowing himself some time to collect his thoughts. "Why have they not come to me themselves?" he asked in a kind tone, trying to calm Remus down a touch.

The look that he received almost made him flinch. He had not counted on Remus being unsympathetic towards his position. After all, he had talked Remus into staying away from Harry when he was just a little child.

Remus' eyes flashed amber for a moment, the wolf plainly visible in that split second before he regained control. His voice held a clipped tone to it when he finally spoke. "I want to take Harry and Hermione to see Sirius and her parents."

"You know that students can't leave the grounds except for Hogsmeade visits." Dumbledore replied immediately.

Remus' response was just as fast and had an edge to it. "And how do you propose that I bring Sirius and Hermione's parents here then?" he finished and sat waiting for Dumbledore to respond.

After a few seconds, Dumbledore answered the question. "You can't bring them here. Muggles can't see this place and Sirius is still on the run."

The sound of Remus' hand smacking the table in between them was like a thunderclap. The fury in his voice was barely restrained when he replied "An innocent man that never had a trial Dumbledore! One that I know you could arrange. The question is why not?" Left unsaid was the insinuation that Remus did know why based upon the sarcasm that was dripping from his voice.

For a second time in this short conversation, Albus was surprised. It was something that he did not like at all. He decided that it was best if he did not answer the question about Sirius. He replied, "Please have Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger back in the castle by eight tonight. Be sure to let them know that this is a special treat that I am granting them and to not be taken lightly."

Without a backwards glance, nor a reply, Remus left the antechamber and strode out of the Great Hall heading back towards the Quidditch pitch.

Neville and Ginny were waiting for Professor Lupin to finish his talk with the headmaster so they could ask him how Harry and Hermione were doing. When they saw him walking out of the Great Hall they sprinted to catch up to him.

"Professor Lupin!" Neville called out when they were within shouting distance.

Remus stopped and waited for the two teens to catch up to him. "Hello Mr. Longbottom and Ms. Weasley. What can I help you with?" he said kindly.

"We wanted to make sure that Harry and Hermione are both alright." Ginny said worriedly.

Remus smiled at his two former students. "They are both a bit shaken up but they should be fine in a few days. Now if you would excuse me please I promised them that I wouldn't be gone too long."

"Okay. Would you please tell them hello from us?" asked Neville.

Smiling down at the shy boy Remus said, "I will. Have a nice afternoon you two."

With a wave goodbye, Remus headed back up to the pitch to collect Harry and Hermione.

Hermione was absent-mindedly stroking Harry's hair. She had pulled him back down and had his head resting in her lap. Her mind was going over what he had recounted about his encounter with the mermen.

He had mentioned cursing the one merman that wanted to keep her down there and she knew what he meant. Oddly enough, the thought that he had killed to defend her did not trouble her at all. What did bother her was that he was forced to kill in this tournament; again.

Hermione knew that Harry would talk about it with her in more detail when he was ready. She just had to keep reminding herself to not slip into her old habits and badger him until he cracked and shouted at her before giving in and telling her all of the details. Ironically, she noticed that when she did not push him to talk that he talked more frequently and openly.

The strain of the tournament had been getting to Harry over the past few weeks and she could see the toll that it had been taking on him. His smiles were becoming further and further apart and he often lapsed into periods where he was just staring off into space when they were alone. Some mornings he would come down to the common room and have large, dark circles, under his eyes. She was worried about what additional stresses that this latest task would add to his already large burden.

The one side effect of their bond that she did not like was that Harry's emotions had a much stronger effect upon her than she originally realized. He was so volatile sometimes that his emotions would occasionally cause her to snap at someone when she didn't mean to. She was trying her hardest to keep an even keel for the two of them so she could balance out some of Harry's overcharged emotions.

What the bond had taught Hermione was that she needed to compromise more. She could not expect everything to fit into her preconceived notions without taking into account how things would affect Harry too.

Lost in her musings, Hermione did not hear Remus coming towards them. Harry, however, did. "Hello Remus." Harry said in a low voice causing Hermione to start in surprise.

Hermione noticed that Harry was sliding his wand discretely back into the folds of his robes. Remus never knew how close he had just come to being cursed by Harry.

Remus was trying to be quiet as he approached the couple so he was mildly shocked when Harry said 'Hello.' He wasn't sure, but he thought that Harry's hands had shifted positions minutely when he greeted him. Pushing that thought to the side, he said to them; "If you two would read this we can get going. Destroy the note when you are done memorizing what it said please."

Hermione accepted the note from Remus and held it so they could both read it. She didn't recognize the tiny, neat, handwriting at all. The note read 'The Granger's live at Number 2, Kensington Gardens, London.'

Etched onto both teen's faces was confusion as they read the note. After a few seconds, their countenances changed to one of comprehension and Hermione spoke "You have my parents under the Fidelius Charm?" her voice laden with concern.

Harry was giving Lupin a very piercing look but he held his tongue for the moment, willing to hear the man out before passing judgment. With a casual flick of his wand, he silently disintegrated the little piece of paper and vanished the ashes.

"We do. Now please come with me, I have gotten permission to take you to visit your parents and Sirius." Remus replied in a whisper even though he was back within the privacy wards.

Harry stood up and helped Hermione to her feet. Looking around the pitch slowly he let his senses expand outward. Not feeling any other magical presences he grasped Hermione's hand and set off after Remus.

When they had reached the gates to the castle grounds Hermione asked, "How are we getting there?"

Remus came to a stop just outside of the wards and said "Side along apparition.

Hermione nodded in acceptance of his explanation and since she didn't seem too concerned by Remus' reply, Harry figured that it would be safe enough.

"Please grab hold of my arms and don't let go. This will feel a bit strange at first but I promise that you will get used to it eventually." Remus said confidently.

When the teens had each taken a hold of an arm, Remus turned on the spot, concentrating hard on the front porch of the Granger's house. There was a faint popping noise and they had reappeared in London.

Harry wasn't sure if he liked that mode of transportation but it sure beat traveling on the knight bus. The squeezing sensation bothered him for a second but then it was gone and they were in a completely different location.

Remus said, "Now concentrate on what you memorized.", while scanning the area in case they were followed.

The teens stood there thinking about the secret and watched in awe as the house just appeared in front of them.

Remus quickly ushered them inside, closed, and locked the door before leading them into the family room where everyone was awaiting their arrival.

When they entered the family room Hermione ran up to her parents and hugged her mum first then her dad before breaking down in a fresh set of tears.

Harry was moving towards Hermione when Sirius stopped him with a gentle touch on his shoulder. He was too worried about Hermione to flinch at the unexpected touch but he did stop and looked up into his godfather's eyes.

It had been quite a while since he had last seen his godfather and he noticed that he looked much better now. The gauntness was fading and Sirius looked much healthier overall. His eyes still held a haunted look, and they probably would for the rest of his life. You could never put some things fully behind you no matter how hard you tried. Harry knew the last bit from first hand experience as he still had nightmares from time to time too.

"Hello Harry." Sirius said softly while holding his arms open for a hug.

Harry looked over at Hermione for a moment and she was still in her father's arms but she gave him a small nod and that was all it took. He stepped into the hug and felt Sirius wrap his arms around him in a protective manner.

It was a completely different feeling from one of Hermione's hugs. This felt protective in an entirely different way and Harry found that he liked it too. The tears wouldn't come even though he was choked full of emotion. He had cried himself out on the pitch with Hermione and Remus so this hug was more about healing some of the pain for him.

Remus looked over at everyone in the kitchen and said "Dumbledore wants them back in the castle by eight pm."

"Thank you for convincing the headmaster to let you bring them home for the rest of the day. It means a lot to us." John said to Remus.

"You're welcome. I'll go and help the elves get started on lunch. These two haven't eaten since last night so they must be starving by now." Remus said as he headed off towards the kitchen to lend a helping hand.

When he arrived in the kitchen he found Dobby and Winky already working hard so he asked, "Can I help?"

Winky looked up at Remus and said, in a tone that brooked no argument, "You may set the table Master Remus."

Chuckling to himself at Winky's order, he went about setting the table for everyone.

After fifteen minutes, the lunch was ready and Dobby went out to retrieve everyone. When he entered the room, he saw everyone seated on the sofas talking quietly about what had happened this morning.

Before Dobby could speak Harry spotted him, gave him a smile, and said; "Thank you Dobby. If it wasn't for your help with the gillyweed and waking me up in time, I wouldn't have made it to save Hermione."

He finished speaking and held his arms out to the elf.

Dobby practically leapt into his master's arms and gave him the biggest hug he could manage. Dobby said, "It was an honor to help sir.", as he stepped back from the embrace.

Hermione had gotten up from her spot next to Harry, knelt down to Dobby's height, and pulled him into a hug that brought tears of joy to his tiny face. "Thank you very much Dobby. You did a great job today."

He was a little choked up from all of the praise that he was receiving. With a smile, Dobby said, "Lunch is ready in the kitchen if you will all follow me please." In his excitement, he was still holding his Mistress's hand and was leading her to the kitchen.

When they all entered the kitchen, Winky saw Dobby leading Mistress Hermione into the room as she was putting the last of the food onto the table. With a giggle she said, "Dobby, I think that Miss Hermione is going to need both of her hands to eat.", as she watched Dobby flush red with embarrassment.

Dobby quickly led Hermione to her chair and sat her down before going over to sit near Winky. The Granger's had insisted that the elves join them at mealtimes and after some serious persuasion, they got their wish. Now, the elves both found that they liked the arrangement because it made them feel closer to everyone.

Hermione was smiling at her parents when she noticed that they had gotten the elves to take meals with them. It was a Granger family tradition to have the entire family together for meals and the fact that her parents considered the elves family really helped to cheer her up.

After a nice meal where everyone kept the conversation away from the morning's events, they all retreated up to the library. John had led everyone up to there thinking that it would provide a familiar background for the teens and allow them to be comfortable for the talk that was coming.

He was not disappointed when Hermione gasped when she entered the room right behind her mother. Her expression was almost identical to Annabelle's the first time that she saw this room. Before John could reach over and close her mouth with a finger, Harry had beaten him to it.

"No drooling Hermione, you might damage the books." Harry said lightly.

"I don't drool!" Hermione replied indignantly only to huff in annoyance when Harry responded with a quirked eyebrow.

This was too much for John and he completely lost it and starting laughing.

Annabelle was red in the face but chuckling softly while Remus and Sirius were looking between the two couples confused.

Not able to stand it any longer Sirius asked; "What's so funny?" which sent John into a fresh round of laughter and put a half smile on Harry's face at the same time.

When he was finally able to reign in his laughter, John replied, "Hermione's reaction and Harry's response were almost identical in every way to when we first saw this room."

Mother and daughter were both blushing lightly and rounded on their men at the same time with the same expressions on their faces. Unfortunately, for them all four men in the house could see their identical expressions and began laughing at the site.

After a few minutes of light laughter, erupting from various parties everyone settled down into the furniture in the room. Harry and Hermione had plunked themselves down on the love seat over by the fire while everyone else settled into the remaining furniture so that they were all facing each other.

To save Harry and Hermione from having to retell their experiences from the morning Remus spoke up "If you two don't mind," Remus indicated the two teens, "I can fill everyone in on what happened and you can fill in any spots that I miss; okay?"

The two teens nodded in relief at Remus' offer and Hermione nestled into Harry's shoulder for comfort, wrapping her arm across his chest protectively.

This reaction did not go unnoticed by the other adults in the room. They had not been around Harry and Hermione as much as Remus so the level of comfort that the two teens displayed together was a bit of a surprise for them.

Harry had closed his eyes, making himself comfortable, when Hermione leaned into him. He was finally starting to unwind from the events earlier that morning. Thankful that Remus had volunteered to retell the story Harry let his mind wander, feeling safe for the first time since the tournament started.

John, Annabelle, and Sirius all sat there riveted to the story as Remus spoke just above a whisper. They could not believe what Harry had been forced to endure. The trauma that he must have been subject too because of the task was immense. They were also very

thankful that he had succeeded in rescuing Hermione from the bottom of the lake.

When Remus had finished telling them what Harry had seen and felt when he entered the hut there was not a dry eye left in the room. He did not spare any detail because everyone here needed to know what was going on.

Sirius was having a hard time not heading up to Hogwarts and paying a visit to everyone involved in setting up the tournament. ‘How could they allow the students to be placed into life threatening events for a stupid tournament?’ he thought helplessly. It was this thought that caused Sirius to reevaluate his thinking towards the Wizarding world and its attitudes.

Annabelle and John were holding onto each other’s hands by the end of the tale. Both of them left speechless by the heartlessness of the magical community.

One thing had really been bothering Annabelle about this whole tournament business since she found out about it. Harry entered against his wishes and forced to compete did not sit well with her. Frustrated with her inability to come up with an answer on her own she blurted out her question. “Why didn’t the judges alter the tournament tasks to something trivial and when they were complete just enter the names of the three legitimate champions? That way Harry wouldn’t have been forced into these dangerous situations.”

Remus was about to answer when he noticed that Harry and Hermione had dozed off in each other’s arms. He motioned for quiet and pulled the afghan over the two teens. Gesturing to the others he moved to the other side of the room and put up a privacy ward so the two teens wouldn’t hear them talking and wake up.

Remus finally spoke when they all took seats on the other side of the room. “They have been running on adrenaline all afternoon. I’m surprised that they lasted this long before falling asleep. Harry was wound so tight since he came out of the water that I was beginning to worry, and Hermione hasn’t been much better. He said, with relief in his voice, “Both of them were taking things pretty hard.”

A look of understanding passed between the adults and they silently agreed to try and not disturb the two teens sleeping on the love seat on the other side of the room.

"Well, to answer your earlier question Annabelle; I don't think that anyone even considered that idea. I know it didn't cross my mind." Remus said earnestly.

"It's a brilliant deduction but I don't think that wizards and witches think outside of the box like that." John pointed out before continuing to make his point. "From what I have read in the books that you lent us I have found that witches and wizards place too much faith into tradition and common practices to even think that there may be a better solution."

Annabelle was looking at her husband with pride and Remus and Sirius were in agreement with John's point, both of them thinking similar thoughts along the line of; 'Are we that set in our ways that we just accept what ever is dealt to us without question?

"The question now is what can we do to help them?" Annabelle said while gesturing towards the sleeping teens. In frustration she said, "I want to pull them both out of that school right now but I understand that I can't really."

"You are correct, the magic compelling Harry to compete could have nasty repercussions if he were to quit." Remus replied.

"Are you sure? Has anyone ever defied the Goblet before?" John asked the two wizards.

Both of them were stumped again by his question. "I don't know." Remus replied and then asked Sirius; "Do you?"

"Nope. I don't think anyone ever has that I'm aware. This is one of those lack-of-proof things, correct? Well, I won't risk Harry's life by telling him to not compete in the third task without solid evidence that it wouldn't hurt him." Sirius responded.

"We could safely pull Hermione out but I think that she would fight us on that based upon how close they seem to be now." John said in resignation. He did not want his little girl to grow up yet but it appeared to be happening despite his best efforts to deny it.

"I agree. We should not separate them. It sounds like Hermione is one of only a very few people that openly supports Harry at school. Removing her would be very bad." Annabelle said while grasping her husband's hand.

"I know. I just don't like that the headmaster put her in danger against our wishes! Is there anything that we could do to help protect her from that in the future? What about a Wizarding guardian other than the headmaster?" John suggested.

"Perhaps there is someone that would help us; we just need to get into contact with her first." Sirius said while trying to work out what he would say to his cousin.

"Who do you think would help us?" Remus asked, curious about which family member Sirius must be contemplating approaching.

"I was thinking about Andromeda and her husband Ted. If they won't help perhaps their daughter Nymphadora will." Sirius revealed his thoughts on the matter.

"Do you think that they will believe that you were innocent?" Annabelle spoke hesitantly. She knew that this was a sore subject for Sirius from their long talks about his life experiences.

"I think so. I guess we will have to have Remus here approach them on my behalf first. I think that we can supply them with some memories to view and maybe something from Harry and Hermione about that night last year when we all saw Pettigrew." Sirius replied wistfully.

Everyone could hear his desire to have some family members believe his innocence.

"Is there anything else that we could do that would help to convince them of your innocence? What about one of those invincible vows?" John asked Sirius.

"An Unbreakable Vow? That is a great idea! I can have Remus contact them and then I could swear an Unbreakable Vow that I was not the Potter's secret keeper. Thanks John." Sirius said enthusiastically.

"Glad to be of service. Do you think that we should wake them soon?" John asked as he glanced at the clock on the wall. They had been asleep for a few hours already and it was nearing dinnertime.

"Let them sleep until dinner is ready. They look so peaceful and I think that is a good thing after the day that they have had." Annabelle said while gazing over at the two sleeping teenagers.

Dinner was a quiet affair since no one wanted to bring up the day's earlier events. However, by the end of dinner Harry and Hermione would have given almost anything to be talking about the second task.

The adults had concluded that Harry and Hermione needed 'The Talk' based upon how close they seemed to be to each other.

This led to a very red-faced Harry and Hermione rejoining each other after they were led to separate rooms for privacy.

Seeing the two teens reactions to each other now that they had each received the infamous 'Talk' Sirius pulled out his Wizarding camera and snapped a picture, forever capturing the moment on film. The look that he received from Hermione sent the other adults into fits of laughter and made him fear that she was going to pay him back somehow.

After a round of hugs and kisses goodbye, Remus took a much more calm and collected Harry and Hermione back to Hogwarts. Spending the day away from the Wizarding world at the Grangers house had been just what they needed to recover.

## Chapter 19: Rita's Big Day.

While Harry and Hermione were recovering from their ordeal at her parents house, Rita Skeeter was just sitting down in her office to write what she was sure would be the biggest story of the tournament, and perhaps the year.

She was about halfway through her opening paragraph when a very familiar black owl landed on her table. 'Today keeps getting better and better,' she thought to herself, as she untied the note from the owl's outstretched leg. The now familiar, loopy, handwriting was clearly visible on the front of the envelope.

With a smile, she tore open the note from her anonymous source and began to read. When she finished memorizing the note, it burst into flames. All of her attempts to save prior notes had ended with them destroying themselves in some fashion as well.

Quickly grabbing her cloak, quill, and notepad, she rushed out of her house and Apparated to Hogsmeade. She took shelter behind a building and when she was sure that no one was watching, she transformed into her Animagus form.

The tiny water beetle made its way to the Great Lake next to Hogwarts unnoticed. When she reached the shore, she settled onto a branch to wait.

Her source said that something big was going to happen down by the shore in the early afternoon. After waiting for fifteen minutes, she saw the Headmaster heading towards the shore with a worried look upon his face.

She flew down to the water's edge and landed on a rock near Albus Dumbledore so she could hear what was going on.

Dumbledore bent down and to Rita's surprise, he stuck his head in the water. A few seconds later, he stood back up and dried his face and beard with a casual flick of his wand. He appeared to be waiting for something.

A moment later the water rippled and four merpeople surfaced a few feet from shore with something floating in between them.

There was a flash of a spell from Dumbledore's wand and then he spoke, "Greetings, Elder. Thank you for coming to the surface." He said politely before continuing to speak. "One of your people mentioned that you had some grave news for me?"

The Elder looked up at Dumbledore before speaking in a solemn voice, "We have risked, and lost, too much Dumbledore."

With a small hand gesture, she waved the two guards that were each holding something forward.

When they reached the water's edge, they removed the cloth that was covering their bundles.

If Rita had been able to scream, her shriek would have sounded up at the castle. Floating between the two mermen was a body, a body in two separate pieces.

Dumbledore peered down at the body over his half-moon spectacles. 'A Severing Charm,' he thought as he examined the wounds. After a few moments, he asked the Elder, "What happened?"

The Elder turned to the guard on her left and waved him forward so that he could speak.

There was a frightened look in his eyes as he moved forward to speak to the wizard on the shore. He was understandably wary after what he had witnessed down in the lake. Being around someone that could end his life with a thought and a flick of a wand was not a pleasant experience.

His voice had a raspy quality to it as he spoke. "The smallest boy arrived just after the hour mark and we had already moved the girl from the dais and into a hut. He blew open the door and demanded that she be released. I wanted to let him take the girl and leave, but my partner refused."

His gaze shifted to the Elder for a moment, when she nodded to him, he continued speaking; "The boy slashed his wand once, and before my partner could move, he was cut in half."

The look on Dumbledore's face was one of regret and resignation. He bowed his head to the Elder and said, "I apologize for your loss. Young though he is; Mr. Potter has a certain disregard for life if he feels threatened. Is there anything that I can do to help his family?" Dumbledore indicated to the deceased merman with a casual wave of his hand.

The Elder knew that there was more to this entire situation than Dumbledore was revealing to her. Deciding that her people's best interest was putting this mess to rest quickly, she replied, "No thank you. The village will manage, we always do. Thank you for your time." Before Dumbledore could reply, she gestured to her guards and they all disappeared beneath the surface of the water, eager to put as much distance as possible between them and the games that the land-walkers were playing.

Stepping back from the water's edge, Dumbledore sighed and wearily said, "Where did I fail you Harry?"

Rita watched, transfixed, as Dumbledore conversed with the Elder. She couldn't believe her ears! The Boy-Who-Lived had killed a merman when he tried to retrieve his hostage late. This was such a huge event that she couldn't wait to get the story to the Prophet.

When Dumbledore turned to go up to the castle, Rita flew from her spot as quickly as she could. As soon as she reached the edge of the wards, she transformed and Apparated back to house so that she could write down everything that she had just witnessed.

While Rita was frantically writing her articles, Dumbledore was relaxing in his high backed chair. He was congratulating himself for a job well done. His plan to use Rita Skeeter to drive Harry back under his influence was proceeding as he had figured.

Rita was so predictable and Dumbledore was using her to get what he wanted. Now, he had to find a way to bring Remus and Sirius back

into the fold. Popping a lemon drop into his mouth, he leaned back in his chair and began thinking up ways to bring them under his control.

Harry and Hermione were reluctant to part when it was time for bed. Their emotions were still a bit raw but the day's events. Their time away from Hogwarts had done a lot to help them along, but only time would truly heal their wounds.

They awoke the next morning after a fitful night's sleep. They stayed noticeably closer than usual during their walk to the Great Hall for breakfast.

Just as they were sitting down to eat; the post owls began delivering the mail and the morning edition of the Daily Prophet.

A feeling of dread welled up in Harry when the students all around him began to murmur, some even had the audacity to point. With trepidation, Harry reached over and pulled a copy of the Prophet towards him.

The headline and accompanying picture that greeted him was enough to make him want to bang his head on the table in frustration.

There, above his picture, were the words 'The-Boy-Who-Kills.' The first words out of Harry's mouth upon reading the headline were, "Oh, bugger." Glancing over at Hermione, he said quietly, "We have to get out of here," when she did not move right away he grabbed her hand and said, "Now."

They left the Great Hall quickly. People were openly pointing, and gossiping, about them now. Just as they reached the doors, they heard someone shout out "We don't want any murderers in our school."

Hermione cringed when she heard what the person had shouted at Harry. She had felt him flinch at the parting accusation.

They reached their spot down by the lake and Harry threw up Silencing and Notice-Me-Not Charms as a precaution. Too angry and upset to think rationally, he took to pacing around the garden.

Hermione was thinking furiously. She knew that Remus wouldn't tell anyone about what had happened down in the lake. That left only one person alive that had witnessed the events, the other Mermish guard. The question was how had Rita Skeeter found out about him?

The only, and very disturbing, answer that she could come up with was that Dumbledore had somehow talked to the merpeople and spoken with the guard. The fact that he told Rita worried, and puzzled, Hermione.

Standing up, she walked over to Harry and pulled him into a hug. While she was holding him, she whispered, "It will be okay. You were protecting me."

"I know. I'm just upset that people will think of me as a murderer. What if the ministry agrees and tries to arrest me?" He asked worriedly.

"Well, one thing about the Wizarding world's views on non-humans is that they aren't considered worthy of having rights." she said bitterly before continuing in a harsh tone. "I mean, look at the way my parent's wishes were ignored and I was placed into the lake?"

"I know, and that bothers me too, but it still worries me because so many people don't see a problem with that belief." He sighed in frustration before speaking again, "If it weren't for you, I would probably do my best to disappear forever from the Wizarding world, consequences be damned."

"Me too." she agreed softly. "If I wouldn't miss using magic so much, I mean. What about going to a different school or something next year?"

Harry drew in a sharp breath; this was something that he had been considering for a while now. He was just a little reluctant to broach the subject because he knew how much Hermione loved learning about magic, and if he really thought about it, he was the same way. "I would miss Hogwarts terribly. This was the first place that I can remember ever being happy." he whispered.

"I know. It's just a thought, but it is something that we should at least discuss with my parents, Sirius, and Remus when the year is out. You can't say that Hogwarts has provided us with the best educational experience possible." Hermione said slowly, as if she was trying to convince herself of the truth of her statement at the same time.

Harry paused for a moment, lost in thought, before he replied, "I know what you mean. One teacher tried to kill me in my first year and in my second, another tried to wipe my mind clear."

Their current issues with the headmaster and a good portion of his staff really didn't lend themselves to returning to Hogwarts for their OWL year but neither of them wanted to voice that opinion just yet. However, they were both thinking about it.

Changing the subject to one that was just as uncomfortable, Hermione said, "What really bothers me is that Dumbledore found out what happened in the lake somehow and let Rita Skeeter know too."

Harry's face took on a truly horrible countenance as he thought through the ramifications of what Hermione had just said. His mind had been turning over the article in his subconscious while they were talking and he knew, without a doubt, that Hermione was correct. His voice was full of loathing as he practically spat out, "What is he playing at? Did I do something to deserve all of this?"

Hermione clung to him tighter as she felt his anger burst through their bond. She tried to pour feelings of serenity back to him, but because she was just as angry as he was at the situation, it was almost impossible for her to do so. The anger lacing her voice as she spoke was frightening, "If I ever find out how that horrible woman is getting those stories, I will make her pay."

"Thanks. The same goes for me too." Harry said as hatred burned in him towards that miserable shrew, Rita Skeeter. Her antics were quickly launching her to the top of the list that he had been compiling of the people that needed to be taught a lesson, or two, or three, in humility.

Harry and Hermione spent the rest of the morning outside, talking about the pros and cons of Hogwarts. By lunchtime, they had quite the list on both sides of the issue.

Feeling that they were not going to make any more headway without talking to the adults, Hermione stood up and pulled Harry to his feet. "Why don't we eat in the kitchens?"

"Sounds good to me. We could eat with Dobby and Winky too." Keeping an arm around Hermione, he guided them up to the castle and towards the kitchens.

They had just rounded the corner to head down towards the kitchens when a spell hit Harry from behind, knocking him down. Since he was unprepared for the assault, he didn't have time to break his fall. There was a loud cracking noise and pain flared in Harry's right wrist.

Hissing in discomfort, he pushed himself up to a sitting position in time to watch Hermione turning her wand on his attacker.

Hermione had been quietly contemplating what they were going to do about the situation in school when she felt something hit Harry. She spun around in time to see Pansy Parkinson putting her wand back into her robes.

Through the bond, there was a flash of pain and anger, followed by resignation, as if he had accepted the situation as normal. A rage began to burn in Hermione, white hot in its fury, and it needed an outlet.

She gave it one a few seconds later.

Pansy saw the look upon Granger's face and began to pull her wand back out of her robes. Before her wand could clear her sleeve, she saw the tip of Granger's wand glow for a second before her world exploded in pain.

Hermione stabbed her wand at Pansy, hot fury over-charging her spell. The Bone Breaking Hex connected with Pansy's leg with a

sickening snap that led to a shriek of pain from the foolish Slytherin student.

Sweeping her steely gaze across the remainder of the assembled crowd, Hermione snapped, “Does anyone else want to take a shot at us?”

Receiving no response, she turned to check on Harry, only to find him already standing off to the side and with his wand pointed directly at the gathered crowd.

Pansy’s shrieks had drawn the attention of a passing professor, one Severus Snape. He stepped into the midst of the chaos and surveyed the scene. Potter and Granger both had their wands drawn and pointing at the group of students surrounding Pansy Parkinson.

Looking directly at Harry and Hermione he said “Wands away. Turning to face the group by Pansy, he said, “What is going on here?” He casually waved his wand and conjured bandages that wrapped themselves around Pansy’s injured leg.

When no one felt brave enough to answer, Snape turned his attention back to Potter and Granger. “Detention tonight, for fighting in the halls and twenty points from Gryffindor.”

Before Snape could continue with his tirade against them, Hermione turned away from him and said to Harry, “Let’s get you up to the Hospital Wing. I’m sure that your wrist is broken.”

Angrily, Snape said, “Where do you think that you are going? Twenty more points for walking away from a teacher. Now get back here.”

“Hermione replied in a voice that was calm and collected, “No. Please feel free to have Professor McGonagall meet us in the Hospital Wing since you don’t seem inclined to provide Harry with any medical care.”

Harry noticed that Professor Snape was having a very hard time controlling his temper. Deciding to see if he could take advantage of

the situation, he asked, “Are you going to take any points and assign a detention to Parkinson for attacking me from behind?”

When he finished speaking, he looked directly into Professor Snape’s eyes. He knew that if Snape were a Legilimens, this would be a temptation that he could not pass up. Their gazes locked, and after a couple of seconds, Harry felt the probe begin. ‘Gotcha!’ he thought happily before pulling his wand and shouting, “Get out of my mind you Greasy Git!”

His voice low, and dangerous, Severus said, “Detention, Potter. Be in my office at seven tonight.”

Politely, Harry replied, “No thank you, sir. I’m afraid that I’ll be unavailable this evening.”

Students were openly gaping at the scene unfolding in front of them. No one had ever stood up to Professor Snape before. Their mutterings were getting louder as they whispered back and forth to each other about what Harry had meant about Professor Snape reading his mind and his rejection of reporting to detention.

Deciding that discretion was the best tactic right now, Harry said, “If you will excuse me, I really need to get my wrist fixed. Perhaps you should send Parkinson up to see Madam Pomfrey too. It looks like she passed out from the pain. It’s not good to deny students proper medical attention.”

Snape was seeing red by this point. He had just been played, by Potter no less, he was sure of it. “You two will report to the Headmaster’s Office as soon as your arm is fixed. Take Parkinson up to the Hospital Wing with you.” He spun around and headed off towards the Headmaster’s Office in a towering temper.

“Come on, Harry. I’ll bring the pug.” Hermione said as she levitated Pansy in front of them.

They both knew that the entire school would know of both encounters by dinnertime.

When they reached the Hospital Wing, Madam Pomfrey was nowhere in sight. ‘How backwards are these people?’ Hermione fumed angrily to herself. Seeing the portrait watching them again, she walked over to it and said, “Go fetch Madam Pomfrey. Harry Potter is injured and needs assistance.”

Without a word, the portrait walked out of the frame, leaving it empty, to find Madam Pomfrey.

Turning to Harry, Hermione said, “Watch that painting and the door please. I would like a quick word with our friend here.”

Harry nodded and leaned his back against the empty canvas, effectively blocking its view of the room, and kept his eyes on the door. He stretched his senses out to their maximum to warn him if someone was coming and wondered what Hermione had in store for the Parkinson bint.

Hermione Ennervated Pansy, after taking her wand, and quickly clamped her hand over the girl’s mouth. The fear in Pansy’s eyes gave Hermione a bit of a rush. She leaned in and whispered in a harsh tone, “If you so much as look at either of us again, I will make this broken leg seem like a vacation.” Not seeing the response that she was looking for, she grabbed Pansy’s broken leg with her other hand, and squeezed as hard as she could, before hissing, “Do you understand?” Pansy’s muffled squeals were like music to her ears.

Pansy nodded her head in agreement, willing to do almost anything to make the pain stop.

“Good.” Hermione stepped back and stunned the pathetic girl in front of her.

Harry had watched the scene with a sense of pride. He thought to himself ‘Was this how Hermione felt when I took out Malfoy?’ He stepped over to her and said. “Thanks you. You were brilliant.” Tilting his head slightly to the side, he focused on something far away and said, “Someone is coming.”

The return of the portrait to its frame preceded Madam Pomfrey's arrival. In an officious voice, the portrait said, "She should be here in a moment."

When the matron finally arrived, she was a bit more businesslike in her treatment of Harry than usual. Harry knew that this was because of the article in the Prophet, but it still hurt.

When she was finished fixing Harry's arm, she asked, "What happened to Miss Parkinson?"

Hermione looked into Madam Pomfrey's eyes and said, "She picked on the wrong person."

There gazes locked for a second but Madam Pomfrey did not seem to want to ask who Miss Parkinson had picked on.

"Thank you for fixing my arm, Madam Pomfrey." Harry said sincerely before they turned to leave.

"You're welcome, Mr. Potter. Do try to be more careful in the future." As she was mending Pansy's broken leg, she wondered what Miss Granger had meant when she said that Miss Parkinson had 'picked on the wrong person.' She decided that she would find out what happened when the girl awoke in a couple of hours. She busied herself tidying up the Hospital Wing until her puttering interrupted when two students came in seeking medical care, causing her to forget her plans.

As Harry and Hermione were making their way to Professor McGonagall's office, Harry asked her, "Do you know how the second task finished?"

Surprised by his question, Hermione said, "Oh. Yes, I do. Parvati and Lavender filled me in last night before bed. Viktor finished first in just under one hour and received forty-eight points. Cedric came in next just over the one-hour mark and earned forty-five points. Fleur retrieved her hostage but was waylaid by the Grindylows and had to be rescued. She received 25 points. You received thirty points for making it back late with me."

"So, I'm in third place then?"

Yes, just above Fleur. Krum is in first, followed closely by Cedric."

Harry said quietly, "I'm just happy that you are okay and that I'm still alive. I could care less about the points, but I think that I wouldn't mind winning this blasted tournament if I can. That would really tick whoever put my name into the Goblet of Fire if I did that."

They finally arrived, and knocked on Professor McGonagall's office door. When they heard their head of house call out, "Enter." They stepped into the room to ask her to attend the meeting with Headmaster Dumbledore and Professor Snape.

## Chapter 20: Dumbledore's dirty little secrets.

Harry and Hermione settled themselves into two of the chairs in Professor McGonagall's office after following her inside. They waited for her to seat herself and get comfortable before Harry broke the silence, his voice low, and even, as he spoke, "Professor, would you please accompany us to the Headmaster's Office for a meeting with Professor Snape? We don't think that our Potions Professor is too happy with us right now."

Minerva knew that this must be somewhat serious, especially if the two teens were in her office asking for her to attend a meeting about something that they must have done. Her Scottish brogue was a touch thicker than normal due to her suspicion, she replied, "What have you done this time to make Severus upset with you?"

Harry detected no anger in her words, so he replied with a touch of mirth in his voice,

"Perhaps it would be better if we told you and the Headmaster at the same time, Ma'am."

Her stare was penetrating, yet Mr. Potter did not shy away from it. Most students quailed and began talking immediately when Minerva turned it upon them. Intrigued by this development, she said, "Very well. Shall we head up to this meeting now or is there anything else that we should discuss first?"

The two teens shared a glance to see if the other had anything to add. "No, Ma'am. We can head up there now if you would like." Harry said in that same, low, even tone that was almost melodious in its timbre.

Hermione had noticed the change in Harry's voice and she made a mental note to ask him about it later.

As Minerva McGonagall let her two students up to the Headmasters Office, she was deep in thought. She was curious about the change in Mr. Potter's voice and attitude. Just a couple of weeks ago he sounded completely different and he was much more open emotionally. Something had changed, and she couldn't quite figure it out, even though she was sure that it was familiar somehow.

When they arrived at the statue guarding the stairs to the Headmasters Office, Minerva said, "Ice Mice."

After a couple of seconds, the statue moved aside and she led them up the stairs. The heavy door to the office was made of oak with iron bands. There was a large Griffin knocker made of brass about head height.

Harry and Hermione were a bit puzzled when Professor McGonagall didn't knock on the door. In fact, she just stood there as if she were waiting for something. After a few seconds, the professor turned around to face them. Instead of looking at them, she looked up above the archway that they had just passed beneath. There, directly above them was a blank canvas, its occupant gone.

Comprehension dawned quickly for them and they looked away from the empty frame. Another one of Professor Dumbledore's secrets confirmed.

Minerva was a bit surprised when neither teen asked her about the empty portrait or why she didn't knock. Not many students really paid attention to the portraits in the castle. The fact that Mr. Potter and Miss Granger looked away from it immediately told her all that she needed to know.

Her thoughts were interrupted when a muffled voice sounded through the heavy door, "Enter."

Harry had been in this office before, but he had not paid attention to detail then. He had been too distracted at the time. This time, he had a plan.

Stretching out his senses, he stepped into the room after Hermione and Professor McGonagall. He was not surprised at the number of enchanted objects in the office, the headmaster was quite old, but it was only a few specific ones that he was looking for.

His gaze swept the room, taking in everything slowly so he wouldn't miss something during his scan. His eyes finally came to rest on the

shelf just to the side and behind the desk. He felt a pull on his magic and thought triumphantly, 'There you are!'

Hermione and Professor McGonagall had seated themselves in two of the chairs in front of Dumbledore's desk. They were both surprised when Harry continued past them, heading straight for the shelf behind the desk, a look of deep concentration upon his face.

Severus Snape was watching Potter closely when he entered the room. There was no look of apprehension on his face. In fact, Potter's countenance looked devoid of emotion, except for his eyes. They narrowed briefly when the boy looked at the bookshelves behind Albus's desk before returning to their normal size.

Curious, Severus swept his eyes across the bookshelf in question. All he saw were those odd, silver instruments whirring and occasionally emitting puffs of smoke, and the Sorting Hat. 'What did the boy want with the hat?' he thought idly.

Dumbledore's focus never shifted, it stayed upon Harry Potter as soon as he entered the office. He seemed to be scanning the room for something. The question in his mind was, 'What is he looking for?'

As Harry approached the shelf behind his desk, Albus felt the hairs on his neck stand on end in alarm. Thoughts were flying rapidly through his head, the most prevalent of them being, 'How does he know about those spells?' Deciding to begin the conversation before Harry could reveal something best left in the dark, he said in his best grandfatherly voice, "Please take a seat, Mr. Potter, we have much to discuss."

To everyone's complete surprise, Harry stepped forward and plucked all of the silver instruments off of the shelf and set them on the small end table next to the last remaining chair. Only Dumbledore and Harry knew what these instruments really did, but Hermione was quickly putting the pieces together in her sharp mind.

McGonagall snapped out of her stupor when Harry set the silver instruments on the table in between them. She was appalled that he would just pick up Albus's things without permission and everyone

could easily hear it in her annoyed tone as she snapped, “Mr. Potter! Why did you pick up the Headmaster’s effects and bring them over here?”

Dumbledore was just about to wave the issue aside but Harry cut across him, dashing his hopes.

Harry’s tone was carefully modulated, not a hint of emotion could be found in his voice as he spoke, “These,” Harry indicated with a graceful wave of his hand, “are precisely why we are here, Professor McGonagall.”

Confused, Minerva turned her focus to Albus. She saw his eyes flinch just a bit and then his usual mask slipped back into place. That was all of the confirmation that she needed. She knew now that Albus had done something underhanded to Harry. The questions burning in her mind were ‘How bad is this going to be and why did Dumbledore do it?’

Hermione understood almost immediately what Harry meant when his hand swept over those innocent looking baubles. This was the perfect opportunity to remove the Monitoring Charm in such a way that Professor Dumbledore would never be able to deny what he had done in the first place.

Severus had enough of these petty games that Potter was playing, in frustration, he growled out, “Enough of this nonsense, Potter. Let’s get down to the real reason why you two are here today. Attacking another student in the halls is a serious breach of the rules.” His anger palpable, he turned to Albus and said, “Headmaster, they should be suspended.”

Harry and Hermione both remained silent through Snape’s accusations. Hermione had attacked a student in the halls but it was in defense of Harry.

When neither student denied the accusation, Snape pressed his advantage. His voice returned to its usual low, silky, tone when he spoke, “You see, Headmaster? They don’t even deny their guilt. Surely, you must agree that they should be suspended?”

Harry's voice was low, almost a whisper, when he spoke, "Have you forgotten that I was attacked from behind, Professor? Surely, you talked to the other students that witnessed the entire encounter?" When Snape didn't reply, Harry continued, "No? Would you like their names? I'm sure that they could all tell you the truth about what really happened in the hall earlier today. Finally, why don't we talk about the fact that you tried to read my mind using Legilimency, without my permission."

Minerva had heard enough to piece together a very good idea of what had happened earlier in the hall from Harry's explanation. She knew that her two Gryffindors should not be suspended for what had happened. Perhaps Miss Granger should receive a detention or two, but only if Miss Parkinson received the same punishment. She was torn from her thoughts when Mr. Potter mentioned Severus using Legilimency on him.

Angrier than she had ever been with him in the past, she rounded on Severus and snarled, "How dare you use Legilimency on a student! If I so much as hear that you have used that on another student, I will see to it personally that you are terminated immediately." Her voice had a menacing quality to it as she completed her rant; there was a promise of more than just a sacking in her voice.

Snape's only response to Minerva's tirade was a quirked eyebrow. He was not concerned about the threat. Dumbledore told him to keep an eye on Potter and that is what he was doing. Using Legilimency just furthered his ability to keep tabs on the boy.

Dumbledore already knew all about the entire encounter. It had happened in front of an occupied portrait that had informed him of every detail. He had been intending to use the event to forgive Hermione in order to indebt her to him.

He had not counted on a few things. First, when Severus made such a big deal out of the altercation and second, Harry's insistence that Professor Snape didn't interview the witnesses before passing judgment and his lack of providing Harry immediate medical care if needed. The part about using Legilimency did not faze him in the

slightest because he did it to everyone around him on a regular basis. He was just far better at the skill and hadn't been caught; besides, he justified that it was for the Greater Good that he used his skills.

Coming to a conclusion, he said to Miss Granger, "Even though you were defending Mr. Potter, you did injure another student. The loss of points shall stand and you will have a week of detentions with Professor McGonagall."

He paused to study the young witch sitting in front of him. She did not seem contrite at all, if anything, she looked a bit defiant. Albus quickly realized why Miss Granger looked so defiant and he made sure to correct the issue before she truly despised him. "Miss Parkinson will also lose the same number of house points and have the same number of detentions with Professor Snape."

Hermione's posture relaxed a bit as the headmaster passed judgment. She really didn't care about the points or the detentions; she just didn't want to be separated from Harry.

Had Dumbledore realized that fact, he would have suspended her. Then he could have let her come back to the school early under certain conditions. Instead, he missed a golden opportunity.

Deciding that the meeting was at an end, Dumbledore said, "Minerva, if you could return Mr. Potter and Miss Granger to Gryffindor Tower, we have other things to discuss."

Surprising her superior, Minerva said, "Not yet, Headmaster. I believe that Mr. Potter has some questions about these trinkets." as she waved her hand towards the items on the table next to her.

In his most persuasive tone, Dumbledore said, "Perhaps we should continue this later. My schedule is very full today."

A voice that was as hard as granite cut across the gap in conversation, "No. We are going to talk about why each one of these items is tied to me through a Monitoring Charm in some way, shape, or form."

The silence in the room was palpable it was so complete. The only noises were from the few items in Dumbledore's office that moved on their own. After a few tense seconds, Professor Snape, with sarcasm dripping from his voice, scoffed, "Do you honestly believe that these tiny baubles are tied to you through a Monitoring Charm? Your arrogance truly knows no bounds."

Minerva had been watching Dumbledore during Severus' tirade, looking for any type of reaction. When he didn't even move to reject Mr. Potter's suggestion, she decided to act. Her voice was formal in its tone when she asked, "Mr. Potter, would you mind if I checked you for any spells upon your person?"

'This is going better than I thought it would.' Harry thought to himself before he answered his teacher, "Please check, I would like to know what has been done to me against my will." Harry had been watching the headmaster out of the corner of his eyes and he saw him shift nervously in his seat.

Trying to head off the coming disaster, Dumbledore calmly said, "Perhaps it would be best if I perform that spell, Professor?", while pulling his wand out in preparation.

McGonagall's voice was sharp as she replied, "I believe that I am more than qualified to cast the Detection Spell, Albus."

Defeated, Dumbledore returned his wand to his robes and slumped back into his chair.

He was thinking quickly, trying to come up with a plan to salvage the situation before it got too far out of control.

Before Professor McGonagall could cast the spell, Harry held up his hand and said, "Please wait a moment, ma'am." Turning to Professor Snape, he said, "Are we finished with our part of the discussion, sir."

"We are, Mr. Potter. Now please get on with this charade, I have important things to do today." Severus snapped in response to Harry's question.

Harry replied, his voice low, but commanding, "Since this doesn't really concern school matters, please leave."

Snape bristled at being dismissed by a student, especially this particular one. Turning his gaze to the Headmaster, he looked to him for support. He was surprised when none came and silently swept from the room without so much as a, 'Goodbye.'

Politely, Harry said, "Please proceed when you are ready, ma'am."

Minerva shifted in her seat to face Harry. She was thinking about what types of spells might have been cast and how to detect them all. When she was ready, she said, "There are a few different types of spells that I would like to try to determine what may have been cast upon you. Is that alright with you?" When she saw him nod his ascent, she drew her wand slowly and began casting.

A few tense moments later, the silver instruments began to stop moving and Professor McGonagall had a look of fury etched onto her face.

Her Scottish brogue made her almost impossible to understand and in her anger, she growled out, "What is the meaning of this, Albus!"

Albus Dumbledore was still trying to think of a way to salvage the situation. If things weren't handled carefully, it could set his plans back years. In a placating voice, he replied to her accusation, "I placed the charms on Mr. Potter when he was a child for his protection in case he was injured or in grave danger."

Hermione felt Harry's emotions burst through their bond. His fury was so strong that it was stifling. As best as she could, she sent her calm emotions back to him, trying to reduce the flame that was powering his anger. Then she noticed it, that feeling of power beginning to swirl around, as he lost the battle with his temper.

She was just getting up from her chair to go to him when the silver instruments next to him broke apart and the table that they were sitting on cracked. Softly, she moaned, "Oh, Harry.", as she stepped over to him and pulled him into a hug.

Minerva was puzzled by Mr. Potter's reaction. She didn't understand why he was so angry. Professor Dumbledore had placed some of those charms on him for his protection, the others, well, she was angry about one of them herself. A Monitoring Charm that she had disabled because she felt that it removed one's privacy.

For the first time since they had entered the Headmaster's Office, the emotion rang true in Harry's voice for everyone to hear. It was pain and longing all rolled into one as Harry's strangled voice called out in a whisper, "What was the address on my first Hogwarts letter?"

Minerva was confused, Hermione was angry, and Dumbledore was nervous after Harry asked his question. Hermione had heard all about the cupboard under the stairs so her anger was understandable. Minerva had never seen Harry's first Hogwarts letter so she had no idea, but by her two student's reactions, it must be bad.

Dumbledore knew he was on thin ice, no matter what he said, he was doomed. Hoping for the best, he said quietly, "It read the cupboard under the stairs as your bedroom." He didn't have to wait long for the other shoe to drop as some of his plans came crashing down around his ears.

Minerva was seething, the headmaster knew what Harry's home life was like and he didn't intervene! She turned her anger on him and hissed out, "What did I tell you about them all of those years ago?"

With a sigh, Dumbledore answered, "That they were the 'worst sort of muggles imaginable,' I believe is what you said. In my defense, I thought that things would have been worse for you if I had stopped by for a visit."

Harry was having a very hard time keeping his temper in check. He was finally getting some answers and he didn't like them one bit. Sometimes the truth was a terrible thing to behold. He had been abandoned, not placed, at his relatives. His emotions roiling, Harry croaked out, "Why did you leave me with them?"

"They were your only remaining family that could take you in and keep you safe." Dumbledore said solemnly.

"Safe?" Hermione practically shouted. "I would hate to see your idea of dangerous! Why couldn't someone from the Black family take him in? They are related distantly on his father's side according to Sirius."

"Miss Granger!" Professor McGonagall snapped, when she saw that Hermione had calmed down, she asked, "And what do you mean about the Blacks and the Potters being related?"

His plans were in complete disarray now; there was no way that he wanted that question answered. An answer that he feared would come in a few moments.

Hermione continued in her classroom voice that she used when she was answering questions, "Cygnus Potter was married to Dorea Black. That would make Harry and Sirius related, and by extension Harry is related to a few of the other Blacks and could have gone to one of them as a child instead of the Dursleys."

Minerva turned to face Albus and asked, "Is this true? Harry could have gone to one of the Black family members instead of his mother's sister?" She was too angry, at herself for not checking on him before, and at Albus for not sending him to a better home.

Sighing, Dumbledore replied, "Yes, Mr. Potter is distantly related to some of the Blacks. However, he could not have gone to them for different reasons."

"What are you talking about, Albus!" McGonagall cried out. "He most certainly could have gone to a member of their family. Not the Malfoys', Rosiers', or Lestranges' obviously, but Andromeda could have easily taken him in. Why did you place him with the Dursley's instead?"

Harry and Hermione were riveted to the conversation taking place in front of them. Their Head of House was doing a good job of asking all of the questions that they wanted answers for. Those questions that she didn't ask the headmaster, they would.

Dumbledore had been dreading that very question. It was the one that he least wanted to answer. Resignedly, he answered her, "Lily's sacrifice was a powerful thing, so strong that I could place him in the house where her sister's blood resided without fear of a Death Eater finding and harming Mr. Potter. I used that sacrifice to create Blood Wards that will keep Harry safe until he is of age, provided that he calls that place home and returns there every year to recharge them during the summers."

Mt. Hermione was about to explode again, Harry could feel her indignation through their bond. Not wanting to interrupt the conversation just yet, he placed his hand on her lower back and began rubbing in small circles to calm her down.

'What in the world are Blood Wards and why didn't they work?' Harry thought curiously to himself. After a few moments silence, he realized why they never worked properly and he finally entered into the conversation. Quietly, he said, "They never worked right, the wards. I have never considered that horrible place home."

Albus Dumbledore was shocked, could something so simple have undone the entire set of wards? "What do you mean that you haven't considered that place home?" he asked.

Harry shot Dumbledore a nasty glare before replying, "You know exactly what I mean, that Monitoring Charm told you all about my health. Didn't any of that information that you received warn you about what was going on there?"

Sidestepping the question, Dumbledore spoke with a reassuring tone in his voice, "Those wards protected you from witches and wizards that meant you harm. Voldemort himself could have been in the area and he could not have touched you."

In a voice with a hard edge to it, he said, "Answer the question, please." After a few seconds where the silence stretched out between them, Harry accusation was almost a hiss it was so low, "You can't can you? You knew exactly what happened to me in that house and

you left me there." There was bitterness in his voice by the time he finished speaking.

Professor McGonagall had a sinking feeling in her gut. Something was very wrong with this picture but she couldn't quite place her finger on what.

Harry was frustrated with the Headmaster's dodging his questions. He knew that there were a few other questions that he could ask that would further clarify the situation and make things difficult for Dumbledore at the same time. With that thought in mind he asked, "Why did my parents go into hiding and what gave you the right to have Hagrid keep me from Sirius?"

Hermione perked up at that last series of questions. Those were two points that had really bothered her for a while now and perhaps they would finally get some answers.

This entire conversation was not going well at all. Albus felt besieged from all sides as uncomfortable questions were asked. Deciding that it was time to end this conversation, he gave a subtle hand signal to one of the portraits to summon him away for an emergency.

The portrait of Everard got the signal and came to his aid. In a voice laced with importance, he said, "Headmaster, you are late for your meeting at the Wizengamot and people are getting antsy. Shall I tell them that you will be there shortly?"

With a look of surprise etched on his face, Dumbledore hastily replied, "Thank you Everard, I had completely forgotten the time. Tell them I shall be there in five minutes."

Standing up from behind his desk, Dumbledore looked at each of the occupants of his office and said, "I must get going. Perhaps we could continue this conversation in the future?"

Knowing that Dumbledore wouldn't make any effort to resume this uncomfortable topic, Harry decided to twist the knife in a bit deeper. "Of course, sir. What time would you like us to come back tomorrow?"

In a kind and pacifying tone, Dumbledore said, "Perhaps it would be best if I contacted you with a date and time. My schedule is going to be very busy for the next few weeks with my Wizengamot duties, the final tournament task, and the end of year items to wrap up."

Realizing that they weren't going to get anything out of Dumbledore at this moment, Hermione decided to rejoin the conversation, "I can come by your office tomorrow, sir. I'll bring our calendars so we can make sure that everyone is free to meet again."

"That is a splendid idea, Miss Granger. What time would you like us to drop by tomorrow to coordinate schedules, Albus?" Professor McGonagall said triumphantly, driving the final nail into Dumbledore's proverbial coffin, rendering further attempts at dodging the issue moot.

Appearing to check his desk calendar, Dumbledore half muttered, "Five o'clock would be the best time. Now if you will excuse me, I really must get ready for my meeting."

The trio had returned to Professor McGonagall's office after their enlightening conversation with the headmaster. Once they were all seated again, Minerva set out tea and biscuits.

Harry's mind was still swirling with the details of their recent conversation with Dumbledore. He still didn't get an answer to the question that he wanted but he did get many things clarified. The issue now was to see where things went from here. He sat back in his chair and took a sip of his tea, trying to reign back in his emotions.

Hermione felt the shift in Harry's emotions when he relaxed into his chair. Looking over at him, she was pleased to see that he was calming down so quickly. Then it hit her, 'He's practicing Occlumency! That's why his voice and emotions changed!' Happy that she had figured it out she looked back up at Harry, only to see him smirking at her over his cup of tea.

His voice was back under control and had returned to the low, even, tone as he spoke up, "Finally figured it out, didn't you?"

There was a hint of pride in his voice that Hermione easily recognized and it made her insides warm. "Yes, I did. How long have you been able to do that?"

Professor McGonagall was a touch confused but the more the two teen's spoke, the more the pieces started to fit together. She decided to wait them out and enjoy her tea.

"A few days ago I started to understand it. I'm getting better at it each day. I think that in a few more months I'll be really good at it." Harry said as he reached for another biscuit.

Minerva had figured out what they were talking about. Curiously, she asked him, "Where did you learn about Occlumency, Mr. Potter?"

Harry's gaze was piercing as he looked into his professor's eyes. He didn't sense any deceit from her so he turned his attention to the room, looking for portraits.

"You won't find any portraits in my office, Mr. Potter. I am well aware of what Professor Dumbledore uses them for."

He nodded in understanding before saying, "I learned it from a book that Sirius sent me."

McGonagall was surprised, learning Occlumency from a book was very difficult and she told him so, "That is very impressive, Mr. Potter. Why would you need to learn that skill?"

She got another piercing look for her question, but something was different this time. McGonagall saw Mr. Potter's face close off as the emotionless mask from Occlumency slid into place.

"It was to keep my thoughts private. I have always suspected Professor Snape, and Headmaster Dumbledore, of knowing a bit too much when they stare into my eyes. Today just confirmed what we suspected."

Minerva knew that there was more to it than Harry was letting on, but she didn't press him for details. It was a good skill to have for any

witch or wizard; she just didn't like what his reasons were for learning it.

With nothing further to talk about, Hermione and McGonagall confirmed when they would meet tomorrow to head up and corner the Headmaster.

When they were done, Harry and Hermione bid their Head of House goodbye and went out to take a walk down by the lake and to discuss what went on in the meeting away from prying eyes.

## Chapter 21: A little bit of growing up.

While Harry, Hermione, and Professor McGonagall were still in Professor Dumbledore's office, Severus Snape was heading down to his dungeon office. He was silently ranting in his head about Potter and his know-it-all girlfriend, Granger.

He was so absorbed in his own thoughts that he was on autopilot. His feet were carrying him on his usual path down from the Headmaster's Office to his office in the dungeons.

Years of having students scurrying away from his approach had made him complacent in their midst. He never thought that he would be attacked within the confines of Hogwarts as an adult.

That is why it was a total surprise when he felt something smash into the back of his head.

The force of the blow rendered him insensate. He was fighting to stay conscious as he fell to his knees. Turning his head slowly, he tried to spot his attacker. Instead, he was greeted with the sight of a heavy boot sailing directly towards his face.

Severus was too woozy to dodge the incoming blow. The last thing that he remembered seeing before the blow rendered him unconscious was the trim of an elegant cloak flapping near the leg of his attacker. The trim was a very familiar shade of green.

With a sickening crunch, the boot connected with the jaw of Severus Snape. Since he was at the top of a flight of stairs when he was knocked unconscious, he fell backwards. His limp body slid down the stairs, breaking a few more bones before coming to rest in a heap at the bottom.

It was a terrified first year Slytherin student that discovered a very bloody, and broken, Professor Snape ten minutes later. The sight of her head of house sent her screaming in terror back to the common room where she quickly alerted her housemates to the situation.

The assailants had left the area as soon as Snape's body began tumbling down the steps. They had been warned about the portraits and as a result, they had taken precautions to avoid being discovered. Their escape from the scene of the crime went completely unnoticed by person, portrait, or ghost.

By the time Madam Pomfrey arrived on the scene, all of Slytherin House was present and they were convinced that Harry Potter had something to do with it.

Ignoring the muttering students, Madam Pomfrey began scanning Severus for internal injuries. Relief flooded through her when she didn't find any internal bleeding. Quickly, she began checking over the rest of his injuries to make sure none of them were life threatening.

There were numerous broken bones, cuts, and contusions all over his body. Stone steps were very unforgiving.

With nothing immediately life threatening, she conjured bandages for most of the injuries and began levitating him up to the Hospital Wing. He was going to be a patient of hers for the next few days.

The portrait network would not catch wind of the attack until Madam Pomfrey had Professor Snape back in the Hospital Wing, treating his injuries, some twenty minutes later. By the time that the first portrait reached Dumbledore, Harry and Hermione were walking hand in hand down by the lake, oblivious to the goings on inside the castle.

Harry and Hermione had entered their garden by the lake after a short walk down by the shore. It was fast becoming a habit for Harry to stretch out his magical senses as he entered a new area. This whole tournament had him on edge and if he wasn't careful, he could end up like Professor Moody, jumping at every little noise or movement.

"Constant Vigilance, indeed." Harry muttered darkly under his breath when he found an Eavesdropping Charm on one of the benches.

He was just about to remove it when Hermione's tiny hand came to rest upon his forearm, forestalling his spell. He turned to face her so he could see what she wanted.

Hermione had placed a finger to her lips to indicate that she wanted him to stay quiet. When she saw Harry's nod in understanding, she pulled out her wand and silently cast a Silencing Spell around the entire bench that he had indicated.

When she turned back to face Harry, he surprised her by pulling her into a hug and kissing her passionately. After a few blissful kisses, he pulled back a tiny bit to look into her eyes and said, "I love you. Thank you for standing up for me today."

Hermione's brain had yet to recover from those kisses. Her lips were slightly parted and a bit puffy. She was vaguely aware that Harry had said something to her a second ago. With no conscious thought, her tongue slowly licked the contours of her swollen lips before she closed her mouth.

Harry was about to ask Hermione a question when he saw her tongue slowly lick her lips. It was perhaps the most erotic thing that he had ever seen in his short life. Deciding that there was nothing better than seeing that look on Hermione's face, he leaned back in and began kissing her just as passionately as before.

Hermione's thoughts and emotions were just calming down from the best snog ever when Harry's lips returned. Their gentle, passionate, warmth made her body respond by molding itself to his as she deepened the kiss.

Harry heard the soft moan escape Hermione's lips and it fueled his passion and drove the hungry kisses that they were sharing to new heights.

It could have been minutes or hours later. Neither teen had any ability to comprehend the passage of time when they broke the embrace. Somehow, Hermione's hands had found their way beneath Harry's jumper and were slowly rubbing his chest. Harry's hands were still outside of her clothes but they had done a bit of exploring as well.

One of his hands was entwined in her hair, gently rubbing the base of her neck and head. His other hand was resting just below the waistline of her skirt, just above the gentle curvature of her bum.

Both of their hearts were pounding and their breathing was irregular. When they looked into each other's eyes, there was no awkwardness, just adoration and love. Their bond was practically humming with emotions. It was difficult to sort out which emotions belonged to whom they were so similar.

In that brief moment, Hermione saw the man that Harry would become reflected in his eyes and she loved what she saw. The one thing absent from those emerald orbs was something that she would miss most, their innocence.

Harry was holding onto the most important person in the world to him. He would move heaven and earth for Hermione if need be. He had made peace with his inner demon's desire to keep her safe at all times and at any cost. Her defending him finally conquered that fear.

He knew that this tournament had cost them both deeply. They were on the cusp, caught somewhere between adulthood and childhood. It was a childhood that neither of them could ever return too, they had seen and done too much.

Silently, Hermione pulled Harry over to a bench and sat him down before she snuggled into his side. She was content to sit there all day and watch the world go by while letting the troubles of the day wash away like grains of sand in the changing tides.

They were still sitting side by side, cuddled together, when Neville and Ginny finally found them.

When they had sat themselves down on the bench near Harry and Hermione, they shared a look before Ginny spoke.

Her voice was laced with concern as she said, "Are you two okay? We heard about what happened in the hall this morning."

Harry gave Hermione's shoulder a gentle squeeze with his arm that she was tucked under, letting her know that she could tell them about it.

"Pansy Parkinson jinxed Harry from behind and he broke his wrist when he fell. I hexed her in return and then Professor Snape showed up. After we got Harry's arm fixed, we had a meeting with the Headmaster, Professor Snape, and Professor McGonagall." Hermione finished speaking in her classroom voice.

"And?" Ginny prompted, "Did you get into trouble for hexing that cow?"

"Pug." Harry corrected her as he broke out into a low chuckle.

"What's a pug?" a confused Neville asked.

Hermione supplied, "It's a dog with a squashed face that is popular in the non-magical world."

The mirth still present in his voice, Harry said, "And Parkinson's face is about as flat as you can get. I mean, look at her nose! It looks like it got smashed when she was a baby or something."

After the laughter had died down Neville looked over at Hermione and asked, "Did you get in trouble?"

There was an edge to Hermione's voice when she replied, "Yes, I lost forty points and I have a week of detentions with Professor McGonagall. I'm not sorry though, Parkinson got what she deserved, and her punishment is the same as mine."

His voice had returned to the low, well modulated, timbre that Hermione was getting used to, "You were brilliant."

In truth, that tone of voice made her insides squirm in a good way. She knew that it masked the emotions and desires that he would let loose when they were alone. It may have been selfish, but she liked that there was now a side to Harry that only she was allowed to see.

Harry could feel the smugness through their bond and he guessed what it was about. Leaning down a bit, he planted a soft kiss on the side of her head, before turning his attention back to the other couple present. “How was your day then?”

Neville smiled before he spoke up, “Pretty good, actually. We explored the castle a bit and then headed out to the grounds to look for you two. I think that we may have found out what the next task is going to be too.”

That peaked Harry and Hermione’s interests. Any information on the Third Task was extremely valuable and could quite possibly save Harry’s life.

Eagerly, Hermione asked, “What did you two discover?”

Ginny piped up, her voice full of pride, “Neville actually figured it out after I noticed that something was different about the Quidditch pitch.”

Neville was blushing slightly from the praise, but his voice was firm in its conviction when he spoke, “It’s a maze. Hagrid is growing hedgerows. They are only two or three feet tall right now but my guess is that Hagrid will have them twenty feet tall in no time.”

“Harry,” Ginny said in a small voice. When his emeralds eyes turned their focus upon her, she almost shivered. They seemed to bore right into her soul. Her voice quavered a tiny bit as she spoke, “I made a drawing of the maze from one of the towers. It’s not great or anything, but I hope it will help.”

Harry took the offered piece of parchment from Ginny’s outstretched hand, a true smile plainly visible for her to see. His voice rang with gratitude when he said, “Thank you, Ginny. This is probably the best drawing ever. It may very well save my life.” Gently disentangling himself from Hermione, he stood up and pulled Ginny into a hug while placing a chaste kiss on the top of her head in thanks.

Turning to Neville, he held out his hand. When they shook hands, he said, “Thank you too, Neville. Hang on to her, she’s a keeper.”

Both teens blushed at the praise and rare showing of affection towards them from Harry. It was something so rare and it was a precious thing to them.

The two couples spent the next hour discussing the Third Task. How to best utilize the map to Harry's advantage was thoroughly covered in their talks. By the time they all headed back up to the castle, they had a rudimentary plan in place to handle the maze.

Their good moods were going to come crashing down around them when they entered the Great Hall for dinner.

## Chapter 22: The Evening Edition.

Rita Skeeter had sent an advance copy of her article for the evening edition of the Prophet to the Hogwarts Board of Governors.

That was why Minerva McGonagall and Albus Dumbledore found themselves in a meeting with Lucius Malfoy and the other eleven Governors.

Lucius Malfoy was enjoying himself. Any chance to make Dumbledore and one of his supporters suffer was to be exploited in his book.

When they were all seated around the conference table, Dumbledore spoke up, "Now that we are all comfortable, why don't you tell us why you called this meeting?"

'He doesn't know, oh how I'm going to enjoy this' Lucius thought to himself gleefully. His aristocratic drawl was crisp, his annunciation perfect, as he said, "We are here to discuss why you two deliberately endangered one of your students against her parent's wishes."

Lucius found the whole situation the height of irony. Here he was defending the rights of a Mudblood to a man that most would consider a champion of. He knew better though, Dumbledore talked about equality but he never did anything to advance the cause. Normally, Lucius wouldn't lower himself to care about muggles and mudbloods. However, this situation was too good to pass up. It would make him look like a caring member of society while making two of his least favorite people look cold and uncaring.

With a small smile gracing his face, he pulled out two copies of Skeeter's article and slid them across the table while saying, "Perhaps you two should read this, and then we can discuss why you felt it was in a student's best interest to put her in mortal peril."

Minerva was about to retort, but Dumbledore forestalled her with a raised palm and a nod to the article. Inwardly, he was seething. He had not predicted any type of response from the purebloods. Muggle-borns were usually beneath their notice.

With a start, Dumbledore realized that he was holding an advance release of Rita Skeeter's article for the evening paper. Staring back up at him was a picture of Harry Potter snapping at him angrily before diving into the lake. 'Oh, this is not going to be good.' he thought to himself as he read the headline, 'Headmaster endangers top student's life!'

After finishing the article, Dumbledore had to admit that it was a brilliant piece of journalism. Not once did it mention Ms. Granger's name or blood status, which was probably why Lucius Malfoy had been so willing to jump at the chance to censure him and Professor McGonagall.

The article went on to paint a picture of a bright, vivacious, student that trusted the Headmaster and how he had betrayed her trust, and the explicit written directions of her parents, by using her in the second task. The caption just below another photo, a picture of Hermione Granger, read, Betrayal in the dead of night! It was a picture of her all dressed to the nines for the Yule Ball, looking the part of a perfect pureblood princess.

To make matters worse, Skeeter made it appear it was Dumbledore's fault that Harry Potter had become a murderer at the age of fourteen. She pointed out that it was Dumbledore's Age Line that the boy had gotten past to enter his name in the Cup.

By comparison, Professor McGonagall got off light. She had been called to the mat for not protecting her student's best interests. There was even a direct quote paraphrased from Minerva herself that was damaging. There really was no getting around the fact that they had taken Miss Granger in the dead of night while she was sleeping, never giving her the chance to say, 'no.'

When Albus looked over at Minerva, he was surprised to find tears in her eyes. Concerned, he asked, "Are you alright?"

Her Scottish brogue was thick with distress and her voice full of self-loathing when she spoke, "No, I'm not, Albus." McGonagall turned to face the Governors and said, "I am ashamed of my actions and have

nothing to say in my defense. I will comply with whatever decision the Board renders." Rising from her chair, Minerva said, "Please excuse me, I need a moment alone. I will wait outside until you send for me."

Albus watched Professor McGonagall leave the room, her posture stooped in defeat. He sighed in resignation and turned to face Lucius and the rest of the Board. His goal shifted to keeping his position as headmaster.

"You have gone too far this time, Dumbledore." Lucius drawled.

"You deliberately endangered that young witch's life by placing her in the lake against her parent's wishes."

When Dumbledore just sat there looking at him, Lucius snapped, "Don't you have anything to say with regard to your despicable actions?"

Dumbledore continued to gaze at the other members of the board, skimming their surface thoughts with practiced ease. It always amazed him how few wizards and witches guarded their minds, or even knew how.

He had gathered enough information from the board members to piece together that they didn't know that Miss Granger was the student in question. It seemed that Lucius had kept that information to himself. It was time to out that little secret. In a voice that sounded like he could have been chatting about the weather, Dumbledore said, "You must be referring to our muggle-born student, Miss Granger. When she is here at Hogwarts, I am her legal guardian. As such, Professor McGonagall and I did nothing wrong."

One of the other members present spoke up, "What about the fact that her parents wrote a letter stating that she was not to participate in the second task?"

Albus folded his hands on top of the table, giving off the appearance of being deep in thought. In reality, he was skimming their thoughts again, looking for how they felt about the issue. A majority of the members were surprised, and disgusted, that they were defending a

Mudblood. There were a couple that truly cared but they were in the minority.

With enough information to proceed, Dumbledore said in his best Wizengamot voice, "Thank you all for your concern regarding Miss Granger's safety. I can assure you that at no time was she in danger. Now, is there anything else for us to discuss? Perhaps we could re-open the issue of increasing the budget for enrolling muggle-borns?" He knew that nothing would make the Board of Governors flee faster than asking for more money to help muggle-born students enroll.

After a few moments of discussion, the members of the board began filing from the room. A few nodded to Dumbledore as they exited while the majority left without so much as a backwards glance.

Minerva McGonagall was sitting on one of the benches outside of the meeting room, waiting to be summoned to face her fate. She was surprised when the school governors began filing out of the room, completely ignoring her presence. Confused, she stood up and walked back into the conference room.

Looking around, she saw Dumbledore sitting serenely in a chair, looking as if he didn't have a care in the world. "Albus?" she asked.

Dumbledore looked up from his ruminations at his Deputy Headmistress; he had completely put her out of his mind during the later part of the meeting. It took him a moment to realize that she wanted an explanation. His voice was back to that kind, grandfatherly, tone that everyone associated with him when he spoke, "Everything has been settled, Minerva. You may return to your duties." He patted her on the shoulder before heading off for the Great Hall to catch the end of dinner.

Lost in her thoughts, Minerva turned and headed off towards her quarters. She needed some additional time to reevaluate her views on many different things in the Wizarding World.

Harry and Hermione were about halfway through the article when they found the part re-hashing Harry's killing of the merman.

Grinding his teeth in frustration, Harry finished reading the article. Overall, the article really stuck it to Dumbledore and that pleased him. It was nice to see the headmaster take some grief for a while. Especially after Dumbledore had brought to light the details of the second task to Rita Skeeter, which resulted in the front-page article in the morning paper.

Hermione was having similar thoughts to Harry with one exception. She realized that Rita Skeeter must not know that Dumbledore was her source. If she knew, she probably wouldn't go after him in the press as she was currently. She was about to tell Harry her thoughts on the subject when he pushed her roughly to the ground from her seat on the bench.

Just as she was about to snap at him for pushing her, a spell impacted right where she had been sitting. Quickly she rolled to her feet, drew her wand, and turned to face her attackers.

Harry had just stretched his magical senses out when he felt the spell coming their way. He realized that it would hit Hermione so he quickly pushed her out of harms way and spun around, wand already in hand, to face the cowards.

Students were scrambling away in their haste to get out of the line of fire. The ones already at a safe distance stood there, entranced; as they watched the events unfold in front of them.

"We know you attacked Professor Snape, Potter! Now you are going to pay." A stocky boy yelled from the Slytherin table as he brought his wand up for a second spell.

Harry thought that the boy's name was Montague or something. He recognized him from the Quidditch Pitch but that was all he really knew about the boy. His voice was low, almost menacing, as he calmly replied, "Put your wand away if you know what's good for you and tell me what you are going on about."

Hermione felt the shift in Harry's emotions as he calmed his mind. It was the second shift that she felt that sent shivers down her spine. It was a cool, calculating, anger. The type that meant nothing good

would happen to the next person that provoked him. ‘Is this what he felt in the lake or is this something else.’ She thought to herself.

Deciding to see if she could diffuse the situation, Hermione said in a placating voice, “We were in a meeting with Professors Snape, McGonagall, and Dumbledore this morning. Then we spent the afternoon out on the grounds.”

Montague snapped, “Shut your mouth, you filthy little Mud...”

Harry’s cold voice cut across Montague’s, “Finish that sentence and you are going to regret it. I never want to hear that word again.”

Power was beginning to radiate from Harry. The promise of violence was palpable in the air.

Hermione shifted to the side to give herself a different angle should things get messy.

The students around, and in between, Harry and Montague began backing away even quicker. Most of them didn’t want to be anywhere near them when spells were exchanged.

Neville and Ginny had pulled their wands in support of Harry and Hermione. They didn’t know that many spells but to do anything less just felt wrong to them.

Dumbledore strode into the Great Hall just in time to hear Harry practically hiss at Montague. He could feel the power swirling around the boy from fifteen feet away. It wasn’t the same feeling that he got whenever he was around accidental magic. This maelstrom from Harry was like a caged beast waiting to be unleashed upon some poor soul.

Not wanting things to degenerate any further, Dumbledore shouted, “Enough! What is the meaning of this?” Several people began trying to speak at once so everything was jumbled. He was still able to piece together enough to get the basics. The rest of the information he lifted from some of the student’s minds. He stayed well away from

Harry and Hermione's thoughts. He wasn't sure how proficient they were in Occlumency, so he took no chances.

Holding up his hands for silence, Dumbledore said authoritatively, "Mr. Montague, that will be fifty points from Slytherin and two weeks detention with Mr. Filch for your unprovoked attack on a student. Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, please follow me." He led them into the antechamber just off the Great Hall where Harry was informed that he would have to participate in the tournament.

The students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang had wisely stayed silent, and apart, during the whole ordeal. A few of them marveled at the display of power from Harry Potter. 'Perhaps,' they thought, 'there was a good reason why he was a champion after all.'

Krum seemed to like Harry Potter and as far as the students from Durmstrang were concerned, that was enough for them to reserve judgment until they knew him better.

Fleur's first reaction to Harry Potter being in the tournament was disdain and that tainted some of her classmate's views towards him. Now that two tasks had gone by, and he was leading in points over Fleur, many of the Beauxbatons students had mixed feelings towards him. They all noticed that he was mainly friends with a very small group of people and somewhat shy. In short, the majority of the Beauxbatons students were now taking a very French attitude towards Harry Potter, Laissez-Faire.

Ron Weasley had watched the entire confrontation with a sense of longing. He noticed how his sister and Neville had drawn their wands in support of Harry and Hermione. 'Perhaps,' he thought longingly, 'I should make an effort to talk to them soon.' He really did miss them for the most part. Seamus and Dean were nice enough blokes, but pretty boring. Ron missed that sense of adventure that came with being friends with The-Boy-Who-Lived.

Professor Moody had watched the entire conflict with a different agenda than most. He was very interested in how Potter reacted to being attacked. It was a pity; Dumbledore had stepped in before the spells started flying fast and furious. He knew that the boy was

powerful; he had been the only one to throw off the Imperious Curse in the entire school. The question that he wanted answered was how would Potter react to being attacked by multiple people? He already knew what happened when Miss Granger was threatened. Rita Skeeter saw to that tidbit of information.

Taking a swig from his hip flask, Moody stumped back up to his office to update his dossiers on a few people based upon this little altercation. 'One can never have too much information about how someone reacts in a given situation.' he thought to himself as he limped down the corridor. An owl would leave his quarters in half an hour, heading to parts, and parties, unknown.

While all of the commotion was taking place in the Hogwarts Great Hall, a different type of event was taking place back at Grimmauld Place.

Sirius Black and Remus Lupin were arguing while the portrait of Phinneas Nigellus looked on in amusement.

"What were you thinking, Sirius? We could have talked to him about it. Instead, you landed him in the Hospital Wing. He could have died!" Remus said in exasperation.

Sirius sat there gazing at his best friend. He loved Remus like a brother, but sometimes he was too passive for his own good. Some people only understood one thing, power. Severus Snape was one of those people and he had just been delivered a very clear message. Mess with Harry Potter again and it would not be a set of steps and a trip to the Hospital Wing, it would be an unmarked grave.

The information that Phinneas had delivered to the Head of the Family had sent him into a towering rage. Sirius had wanted to storm up to the castle and simply kill Snivelous for his treatment of Harry. Phinneas had convinced him to send a warning message first.

Sirius had worn his finest robes. Ones he knew that Snape would recognize. They were the Head of Family set, something that Snape would know from his Death Eater cronies. Lucius Malfoy wore his often enough that there was no way for Snape to mistake them for

anything else. Regulus had worn a similar set of robes and he knew Snape had seen the Black Family trim while they were in Slytherin House together during their Hogwarts days.

Breaking from his reverie, Sirius finally spoke up, his voice was surprisingly calm despite the heated topic, “Remus, you know what Snape is like. Talking to him is like banging your head against a cauldron. He was a Death Eater, for Merlin’s sake! Do you honestly believe that I could have reasoned with him? He still hates me and tried to have me kissed by a Dementor in case you forgot.”

Remus was frustrated. He wanted to protect Harry as well. He just didn’t think that it was time to take such drastic measures. Years of suppressing the wolf inside of him had taken a different type of toll on him beyond the physical. By denying the wolf, he had altered his personality into something it should not have been. A docile shadow of a man, instead of the dominant alpha male, was what had emerged. He just didn’t know if he could bring himself to embrace what he was and become what he should.

Defeated, Remus whispered, “You’re right, Sirius. Snape wouldn’t listen to reason. I think that it is time that we start taking a more active role in protecting Harry from now on. Consider this the beginning of a new era. Deal?”

Sirius was shocked. He did not think that he would live to see the day when Remus tried to change his personality. Automatically, he stuck out his hand to shake on it and said, “Agreed. We do everything that we can to protect Harry, even if it means being more proactive.”

Phinneas had watched the entire exchange with interest. He didn’t like what Dumbledore was doing to one of the members of his family, no matter how distant. While he owed allegiance to the school, he felt that his first duty was to his family. With so few decent members left alive, Phinneas felt it was even more important to keep a watch over them if he could. That was why he had informed Sirius of what was happening with Harry Potter and why he had directed the portraits away from the stairwell where Snape was given his message.

Back at Hogwarts, Dumbledore, Harry, and Hermione were seated in the antechamber off the Great Hall.

The feelings of anger were still palpable around Harry. He was desperately trying to clear his mind. It would not help matters if he were too angry to think clearly.

Hermione was pushing her feelings of calm and love through the bond in an effort to help Harry calm down. She was grateful that he had pushed her out of harms way. Silently, she reached over and clasped his hand under the table in a show of support.

Harry felt Hermione's calming influence through the bond and that was helping him immensely. When she clasped his hand in hers, a feeling of serenity washed over him and his mind cleared instantly. The physical touch of her soft hand was acting like a barrier against his anger. It was hard to feel angry when she touched him and he was thankful. Turning his attention outward, he focused on the Headmaster sitting across from him.

Dumbledore had watched the storm raging in Mr. Potter's eyes and he was wondering if he could use that to his advantage. He was a little shocked to see it vanish completely in a matter of seconds. The boy must be much better at Occlumency than he originally figured.

His gaze was so focused on Harry that he didn't notice Hermione reaching over and clasping hands with Harry under the table or he might have started to put together the true extent of their relationship.

After a few moments, Dumbledore finally spoke in his kind voice, "Mr. Potter, why did you threaten Mr. Montague? You could have reported him to a professor instead."

A flash of irritation swept through Harry at Dumbledore's question. 'Was he that far out of touch with reality or was this all part of his secret agenda?' he thought to himself before he replied, "He did fire a spell at Hermione's back, sir. He was also about to call her, I'm not going to use that word, something nasty. Why should I stand for it?"

Albus fixed Harry with a penetrating stare. It was sorely tempting to test the boys Occlumency Shields but he knew that would further damage their relationship. Instead, he said calmly, "It is imperative that you forgive others for their transgressions, lest you risk becoming like them."

'That's it, he's barking mad.' both teens thought simultaneously.

Harry's voice was like ice, but it was in that low, melodic, tone when he spoke, "Why? Do you honestly think that they are feeling guilty about what they did? I have yet to receive one apology for the buttons, lies, and the attack on my person."

Hermione was furiously trying to figure out what Dumbledore's agenda was. 'Why does he want Harry to constantly forgive everyone for everything that they do to him? It's like he wants him to keep turning the other cheek in sacrifice.' she mused. Suddenly, she had a very disturbing thought, one that chilled her to the bone far worse than the coldest of winter winds. 'Dumbledore wants a martyr and he is trying to mold Harry into one. Was that the reasons behind everything in his life so far?'

Harry felt the flash of panic flit through their bond. Hermione had just had a serious revelation and he knew it wasn't good.

Dumbledore was framing his reply. He knew he had to be careful. They were on a precipice and he needed to make sure that Harry continued to develop according to his plans. Very calmly, he said, "Their guilt or remorse isn't the issue, Mr. Potter. A good person will always strive to see the best in others and I know that you are a good person. Don't let your anger cloud your emotions and you will see that it is always best to give others another chance."

Hermione was silently fuming in anger as she thought, 'That manipulative, clever, man.' It was subtle, but Dumbledore was trying to guilt Harry into doing what he wanted. She wasn't about to let that happen, so she finally spoke up, "Sir, what about justice? How can someone deserve forgiveness if they haven't repented their actions?" 'Take that!', she thought viciously, pleased with herself that she was

either going to force him to admit what he was trying to do or end the meeting to avoid the question.

Realizing that he had been cornered, Dumbledore wisely retreated and tried a slightly different angle, "It is always best if they repent, Miss Granger. However, some people won't repent without forgiveness."

Harry was watching the verbal tennis match with interest. Hermione was trying to prove a point and Dumbledore had just changed tact slightly, he was sure it was very important. Now he just had to figure out why without being able to talk to her.

Hermione understood that Dumbledore was not going to budge in his reasoning. Knowing that this was a lost cause, she said, "I understand. Is there anything else, sir?"

Dumbledore was trying to figure out if Miss Granger had acquiesced or if she truly agreed with his point of view. Mr. Potter had not so much as moved a muscle since they started talking and that surprised him. He thought for sure that Harry would have interjected his views into the conversation at some point. Testing the waters, he said, "Do you agree, Mr. Potter?"

Knowing that Hermione had somehow thrown Professor Dumbledore off for a moment, he readily agreed, "Yes, sir."

Beaming at his two students in relief, Dumbledore said, "Good, good. Now run along and grab some dessert."

Albus watched as the two Gryffindors got up and left the room together. His was going over the entire conversation in his thoughts, trying to see if he had missed something. Deciding that he hadn't, Dumbledore got up and headed into the Great Hall for a spot of tea and a few sweets.

He never realized that Hermione had caught on to his scheme and that Harry had trusted her blindly and followed her lead.

Neither teen noticed that Dumbledore didn't deny that Harry had attacked Professor Snape. They were too focused on the hidden meanings behind what he was saying and it had slipped their minds.

Later that evening an owl would deliver Moody's missive to a large, dilapidated, manor house near a graveyard. Its contents would make their recipient very happy.

## Chapter 23: The calm before the storm.

The two Gryffindors were making their way back to their house table, ignoring the muttering and stares from their classmates. They knew that appearances were very important to keep, so they sat back down in the same seats as before, acting as if nothing had happened.

When the rest of the students realized that nothing else was going to happen, they began turning their attention back to their own meals and conversations. There were a couple of students that didn't take their eyes off the two Gryffindors right away. They were busy trying to sort their thoughts on what they had just witnessed.

Draco Malfoy had been quietly observing his handiwork. He had been the one that had begun the rumor that Potter had attacked Professor Snape. His goal had been revenge for his stint in the Hospital Wing courtesy of Potter. He never saw his attacker, but he knew that it was the Gryffindor Golden Boy. Turning Slytherin House against Potter was something that would keep his hands clean while providing him with entertainment and keeping him away from him and his Mudblood whore.

Another figure sat alone at the end of a house table, watching everything. No one ever sat with her, or even talked to her unless they had to. Her isolation allowed her time to think about events more than your average teenager did. As a result, she knew much of what went on, in, and around Hogwarts. She knew that events were coming to a head around the school and that Harry Potter and Headmaster Dumbledore seemed to be at the center of most of them.

The winds of change were beginning to blow. Now she just had to decide where her loyalties were going to lie.

Harry and Hermione settled into the Room of Requirement thirty minutes after they finished dessert. They wanted to discuss the meeting that they just had with Dumbledore.

The room looked just like the library at Hermione's house and Harry couldn't figure out why the room had morphed into this particular replica. He supposed that it was because it was the first place that he

felt safe in since the tournament started. He hoped that one day he would have a home where he would feel safe and loved. 'As long as Hermione is with me I would be happy,' he thought wistfully while he looked around the room.

Hermione guided Harry over to the love seat that they had fallen asleep on while visiting her parents. She sat him down and then proceeded to lay down with her head in his lap so she could gaze up at him.

Harry began absent-mindedly playing with her hair when she lay her head down in his lap. He found it very calming to run his fingers through her hair. He noticed that it had grown quite long during the school year and he really liked it that way. It had lost a large portion of its bushiness with the added length and weight.

He spoke in a whisper using his regular voice, not the one carefully modulated from Occlumency, and he lovingly said, "I love your hair longer. It makes you even more beautiful."

Hermione looked up into the eyes of the man that she loved, "Thank you. You're actually one of the first ones to say anything about my longer hair. Ginny noticed it when we were getting ready for the Yule Ball but I think that it's gotten a touch longer since then." She had pulled a few strands in front of her face to examine them idly while she spoke.

Harry was mesmerized. Hermione's hair had fanned out around her head and across his lap when she pulled a few strands loose. It made her look like her head was wreathed with a caramel colored halo. Leaning down, he placed a gentle kiss on her forehead and said, "I love you. Now, what were you going to tell me before all of this mess started?"

Hermione's insides were dancing in pleasure. She so rarely heard his real voice that she had almost forgotten how much she loved its timbre. It was at that stage between a boy and a man where it was starting to deepen into what it would become one day.

Resignedly, she ended her ruminations and returned to the task at hand, "Professor Dumbledore is Rita Skeeter's anonymous source. It's the only thing that makes any sense and she must not know whom it is either. Otherwise, I don't think that she would be going after him so vigorously in the paper."

Harry had begun to seethe, his anger a slow boil, as he thought about the ramifications of Hermione's statement. His voice held a hint of regret as he spoke, "I had been hoping that Dumbledore wasn't as manipulative as we thought he was. I fear that he may actually be even worse. Has any of my life actually been free from his influence?"

Hermione's reply was just a whisper, "I wish that I knew. The worst part is that I think that he wants you to sacrifice yourself for some reason." She broke down into sobs at the thought of Harry dying for some cause where only Dumbledore knew the complete details.

His voice was laced with concern as he spoke softly to her, "Shhh. It's okay. I'm not planning to throw my life away for some cause that only Dumbledore seems to believe in. Especially since he hasn't seen fit to tell me what it is I'm supposed to become a martyr for."

After a few minutes, Harry snuggled down on the sofa and Hermione draped herself across his chest, her fingers idly stroking his shoulder as she lay listening to his heartbeat. It was a reassuring sound and she found herself drifting off to sleep.

Neither teen knew what time it was, just that it was way past curfew. They day had been a very draining one for them, physically and emotionally. Harry pulled her tighter to his chest, kissed the crown of her head, and whispered, "I love you."

Hermione was halfway between sleep and wakefulness; her response to Harry's declaration was to grip his body tighter as she wriggled into a more comfortable position.

He didn't know how long he lay there, holding her in his arms, before he drifted off to sleep. When he awoke, he was pleasantly surprised to find that she had not moved at all. Her hair had come free from its plait and fanned out over her back and his arm. It was little moments

like these that Harry cherished the most. They were so pure, almost innocent, that he felt like crying and he didn't know why.

What he did know was that if it weren't for her, he would have succumbed to the darkness inside of him. Harry wasn't sure if it was his own darkness or something from his connection with Voldemort. She kept him grounded in the here and now and that was a good thing. Lately, he had been getting flashes of anger from Voldemort and it had been affecting his moods, pushing his budding skills in Occlumency to their limits.

Harry knew he was no light wizard. He was more of a shade of dark grey. The tournament and Albus Dumbledore had seen to that. 'How ironic, Dumbledore wants a passive martyr but he's going to get a lion amongst the sheep,' he chuckled quietly to himself as he thought, 'well, some sort of big snake actually.'

Looking down at the beautiful young woman sleeping on his chest, Harry reached up and stroked a few loose strands away so he could see her face clearly. He knew that she had trouble sleeping in the tower since the second task but she didn't want to admit it. It was times like these that Harry wished that he could take all of her burdens away. She deserved to be free of their oppressiveness. Unfortunately, only time, or leaving Hogwarts, would solve the problem.

Morning dawned and they awoke to the smells of breakfast on a table set for two. When they were almost done with their food, Winky popped in to check up on them and to deliver fresh clothes.

"Here are some fresh clothes and a new vest and cloak for each of you." Winky said proudly.

Confused, Harry said, "Thank you, Winky. Why do we need to wear a vest?"

Winky's voice held a hint of laughter as she said, "It is a dragon hide vest to help protect you. Just wear it under your robes. The pants, boots, and gloves are not finished yet. When they are ready, I will deliver them to you."

While holding up the vest, Harry said curiously, "Winky, did you make this? It's really impressive."

The tiny elf blushed at the praise before replying, "I did. Please wear them every day for your safety. Before I go, here is the dragon's tooth and tail spike that you requested. Have a good day and please call if you need anything." Winky bowed low before popping away, leaving behind a pair of semi shocked teens.

"Wow, she really sounds different doesn't she?" Hermione said in awe. "It's like they are completely different people."

Harry was still staring at the tooth and spike when he replied distractedly, "Yes, she does sound different." He was turning the tooth over in his hands, looking for any cracks. Finding none, he slipped the tooth into his robe pocket and began examining the spike for imperfections.

Hermione was curious about the tooth and tail spike that Harry requested, "What are you going to do with those, Harry?"

"Hmm." he replied distractedly. Realizing that she was asking about the tooth and spike, he answered, "Oh, I'm going to make them into knives of some sort. As I have discovered, wounds from a magical creature are very difficult to heal and they take a very skilled healer to fix them properly."

She didn't really know how to reply to that so she chose to stay quiet. Hermione had noticed that Harry went everywhere with his potions knife strapped into his robes in addition to his wand. Quietly, she asked him, "Do you think that I should start carrying my knife around too?"

Part of him wanted to say no, she didn't need that extra burden. In reality, he knew that the better defended she was, the likelier that she was to come out of a situation alive. He gazed directly into her eyes as he spoke in a voice full of resignation, "Yes, I do. You have already been targeted twice this year."

She reached a hand up to her neck, her fingers tracing the contours of her throat in a reassuring gesture. She understood what he meant so she replied earnestly, "I will carry my knife on my person at all times from now on."

They sat in companionable silence for a while longer, both of them enjoying the quiet before they returned to the hustle and bustle of Hogwarts.

Severus Snape was in pain and he didn't know how he ended up in the Hospital Wing. The last thing he could remember was walking down towards his office when something smashed into the back of his skull. There was another tiny detail flitting at the edges of his awareness but he knew it would come with time.

With a groan, he tried to sit up but found that the world spun with the effort. Slumping back down into the soft hospital bed, he called out, "Poppy?"

A few seconds later, the matron came bustling up to his bedside with her wand in her hand. Relieved to see him awake, she said concernedly, "You gave us quite the scare, Severus. Do you remember anything about the attack?"

That seemed to jog his memory. He experienced a brief flashback as a memory returned, triggered by Poppy's question. He remembered a boot sailing straight for his face that appeared to be wreathed in a black cloak with green trim. Hesitantly, he said, "I do."

After a few moments of silence, Madam Pomfrey couldn't take it any longer and asked, "Well?"

Severus gazed back at her, his face an expressionless mask, but he refused to speak any further on the subject.

"Fine, be that way." she huffed in annoyance, "I'll fetch Professor Dumbledore. He wanted to be informed when you awoke." She stepped over to her office and sent the portrait off to tell Albus that his tight-lipped Potion's Master was awake.

Ten minutes later, Dumbledore strode into the Hospital Wing and headed straight towards Snape's bed. Without any preamble, he asked, "What do you remember?"

Snape took a moment to reflect on the situation. He was sure that the attack was a message to him about his treatment of Harry Potter. His voice had resumed its low, silky, tone when he replied, "I was attacked as a warning. I could have just as easily been killed; instead, I was put into the hospital." Seeing the look on Dumbledore's face, he quickly added, "It was not a student, headmaster."

Albus was relieved that it wasn't a student that had attacked Severus. However, he was worried that an adult had gotten into the castle with the intent purpose to cause serious injury to a member of the staff. In his grandfatherly voice, he said, "Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the incident?"

Severus almost snorted in laughter at Dumbledore's obvious attempt to wheedle more information from him. His voice flat, he said, "No, sir."

With a sigh, Dumbledore said, "If you think of anything else, please let me know." before turning and walking out of the room.

Angrily, Severus thought, 'Oh, I know that Black attacked me. I'll have my revenge against him and Potter. The boy obviously tattled about the treatment he received at my hand.'

Over the next couple of weeks, the rumors finally began to die down about Harry Potter attacking Professor Snape. Unfortunately, those two weeks were two of the longest that Harry had ever experienced while at Hogwarts. He was constantly on edge when around the Slytherin students and in Snape's class.

Professor Snape had found some way to give Harry zero marks each day in class. Blatant sabotage of potions and vanishing the contents of his cauldron were the two most common methods of payback. His plan was to fail the boy for the year and force him to re-take the class with the fourth years while he was a fifth year next term.

Harry was at a loss about what to do in regard to his potions grade. He knew what Snape was doing but he didn't know how to get around it. Harry had even owled Remus and Sirius to let them know what was going on.

Surprisingly, Remus was furious. He took teaching children as a sacred thing with no place for petty grudges and revenge for other people's sins. Sirius thought that dropping potions all together was a better idea.

Hermione had been wracking her brain in an attempt to figure out what they could do to stop this nonsense. In the end, she went to Professor McGonagall and explained the situation in the hopes that she would intervene on Harry's behalf.

The resulting row between the professors in the staff room one afternoon was clearly heard in the hall by passing students. By dinnertime that night, the whole school knew that Harry Potter was flunking potions and the teasing began by the Slytherins. There were even rumors that Harry had tried to get preferential treatment because of his status and that Snape had turned him down on principle.

The only things keeping Harry from lashing out at everyone was the extra training and snogging sessions each night in the Room of Requirement. He was able to take out his anger on the training dummies that looked just like the person that had irritated him the most that particular day. Hermione also rewarded him with kisses for keeping his temper in check. The good news was that Harry's Occlumency skills were progressing rapidly.

Remus was frustrated. Snivellous was doing his best to avoid being caught unaware again. Nor was he ever alone in the halls. There was always someone with him, student, or teacher, when he was active in the castle.

As the days to the start of the third task grew shorter, Hermione had been trying to work out what Harry's plan was going to be to no avail. He would smile and dodge the question.

They did get the map of the maze completed with help from Remus, Winky, and Dobby. The map now boasted the exact locations of every trap, creature, and the location of the Cup.

By the time the third task rolled around, Harry was looking forward to it because it would distract everyone from what was going on in his personal life.

## Chapter 24: The Dark Lord Arisen.

The evening of the third task was upon them. Harry had eaten a light meal in the Room of Requirement with Hermione, Dobby, and Winky before getting dressed in his new tournament robes.

Looking them over, Harry said with pride, "Winky, you did a fantastic job on these robes."

"You're welcome, Master Harry." Winky replied with a light blush visible on her cheeks. No matter how often her Master or Mistress complimented her, she still felt amazed, hence the blush.

The new dragon hide pants and boots were surprisingly light for such a thick material. Harry figured it must have something to do with their ability to fly. If they were too heavy, they wouldn't be able to get off the ground. He already knew that their bones weren't hollow like a bird so it made sense to him that their hide was light and durable.

"We need to start heading down to the Quidditch Stadium, Harry." Hermione said as she took his hand.

He gave her hand a soft squeeze and then knelt down in front of their two elves. "Thank you both for the hard work these last few weeks on the map and the clothing. I don't know what we would do without you."

After hugging the happy elves goodbye, Harry and Hermione left the Room of Requirement and headed down towards the Quidditch Pitch.

Hermione had the map of the maze in her hands, studying it. She and Harry had completed the charms work a few weeks ago with the help of Dobby and Winky.

Dobby had confirmed that every path was correct and Winky had focused on the areas where it looked like challenges or traps could be placed. The two elves had done a final walk through and updated the map that morning. It now showed the exact type and location of each creature, trap, challenge, and the cup itself. They had taken the

updated version to Remus so that he could make a few copies for everyone.

The plan was to have her, Remus, Tonks, and Sirius each armed with a copy of the map to keep a watch over things in the maze and the immediate surroundings. The change to the maps that Hermione had suggested was to connect them. Remus had set them up so that they could highlight a dot on one map and it would change color and flash on the others. This way they could alert each other about possible dangers.

Remus was stationed nearest the cup in the stadium while Sirius was hiding beneath the stands in his Animagus form. Tonks had been assigned to the Minister's security detail; her job would be patrolling the perimeter of the maze. She had volunteered for the detail since the entire veteran Aurors Corps wanted to watch the tournament.

Remus had approached Nymphadora just after the second task. After about a month, Remus was able to gain enough of her trust to get her to agree to meet with Sirius and they convinced her of his innocence. Her position as an Auror trainee was a big advantage for them. She was able to pick up a lot of information into the workings of the ministry and pass it along.

Hermione was sitting with Neville and Ginny in the student section of the stands. They chose seats right in front instead of higher up in one of the towers. She wanted to be close in case she was needed.

Harry and the other Champions were milling around in the starting area. Each of them was a bit anxious about the task but Harry's anxiety was for an entirely different reason.

His scar had been prickling all day. It was as if he could feel the darkness closing in. He was glad that Remus, Sirius, and a woman named Tonks all had copies of the map and were looking for signs of trouble.

Harry wasn't actually bothered about the maze; he had a plan for that part. It was the hidden dangers that they hadn't found that worried

him. He began going over his checklist as a way to help stay calm while he waited for the Third Task to start.

He was wearing the new dragon hide boots, vest, pants, and gauntlets that Winky had made for him and Hermione. His wand was in his forearm holster along and the dragon spike dagger in the other. The dragon tooth dagger and his silver potions knife were in the built in holsters in his boots. Winky had added them after seeing the completed daggers. Overall, Harry didn't think that he could be any more vigilant in his equipment needs. The psycho defense teacher would be proud, he was sure.

His fingers traced the handle of his new dagger. It had taken him a solid month of hard work and patience to complete them and he was quite proud. Honing the blades had been the hardest part. He had been extra careful while making the blade from the tooth because he wasn't sure if Horntails were poisonous like the Ridgeback that bit Ron during their first year. Since he didn't want to find out the hard way, he took his time.

He had gotten the idea of making the knife during one of his swimming lessons with Hermione. She had been tracing her fingers along the thick, ropey, scar very slowly. It was as if she were realizing how close she had come to loosing him. That reminder also made him realize how close to death he had truly come that day.

Harry was broken out of his musing when Dumbledore's magically enhanced voice boomed out, "Attention! The Third Task is about to begin. Viktor Krum will enter the maze first, followed by Cedric Diggory, Harry Potter, and finally Fleur Delacour. Champions, prepare yourselves. The Triwizard Cup is located somewhere deep within the maze. The first one to reach the Cup will be the winner."

Dumbledore paused to let the cheering and applause die down. Turning to face the Champions, he motioned Krum to the entrance of the maze. Facing the crowd again, he said, "Let the task begin!"

Harry felt a sense of calm wash over him when Viktor darted into the maze. He was comfortable with his plan; now all he had to do was wait.

Hermione was watching Krum's progress through the maze with interest. She wanted to see how he fared and how much he knew about the maze. 'He doesn't seem to know the layout of the maze,' she thought to herself as she watched him double back for a second time.

She heard Dumbledore send Cedric into the maze and her eyes shifted to begin following his progress. As a result, she never noticed the dot labeled, Viktor Krum wander next to another labeled, Barty Crouch, Jr., someone that was supposed to be dead. Nor did she see how Viktor's dot seemed to be heading away from the Cup and towards Cedric Diggory.

Nymphadora Tonks was scanning the map when she noticed something wrong. In front of her stood Mad-Eye Moody but on the map he was labeled, Barty Crouch, Jr. Confused, she alerted everyone about the anomaly and began making her way towards him with her wand in hand.

Remus looked down at the blinking dot on his map and frowned. Harry hadn't even started yet and there was already trouble. 'Why had Dora flagged Barty Crouch? Wasn't he missing?' he thought to himself as he made his way towards them. His pace picked up considerably when he noticed the Jr. tacked on at the end of the name.

He turned the corner and saw Dora talking with Moody at the edge of the maze. Confused, he looked down at his map and realized the problem at once, Polyjuice Potion.

Stepping up to the pair, Remus called out, "Hello, Mad-Eye. Hello, Dora. Everything okay here?"

Moody's voice was gruff as he barked back, "Hello, Remus. Everything is going well here. I need to get back to patrolling the perimeter. Please excuse me."

Just as he turned his back to them, Remus struck. "What's that?" Remus cried out in alarm while pointing towards the edge of the

maze. When Moody shifted his attention, Remus hit him as hard as he could on the temple. The blow was so great that Moody's magical eye popped out of his head and came to rest on the ground next to Dora's feet.

Before Moody could hit the ground, Remus pulled the unconscious imposter upright. Turning to Tonks, he said, "Disillusion him and grab that eye. The real Moody will want that back if he is still alive."

Tonks performed the spell on the fake Moody and pocketed the magical eye. When she stood back up, she levitated the body and said, "I'll have to return to my patrol. Can you handle him alone?"

Remus nodded and said, "Yes. I'll be taking him somewhere secure before beginning to question him." He grabbed the unconscious, levitating, body and headed up towards the castle.

They had been so wrapped up in apprehending Barty Crouch, Jr. that they never noticed that Harry had entered the maze.

Harry had memorized the entire layout of the maze in preparation for the task. He quickly turned left and after about fifteen meters, he stopped and stood there, waiting for Fleur to enter the maze.

When her turn came, Fleur ran forward and turned left. She was a bit shocked to see Harry Potter standing in the middle of the path, blocking her way. Annoyed, she said, "What do you think you are doing, Harry Potter?"

Harry quirked an eyebrow at her tone and silently stepped aside for her. He knew what was around the bend and he wasn't sure if he wanted to face a Boggart right now. He was pretty sure what his greatest fear was and that was something best left for another time.

When he heard Fleur shout something in French, he figured that she had found the Boggart. Deciding that enough time had passed, Harry turned towards the hedge wall leading to the center of the maze. With a sharp jab, and a twist of his wrist, flames shot out of the tip of his wand. When he ended the spell there was a hole large enough for him to slip through. 'Only five more to go.' He thought to himself

happily. He had checked and re-checked the rules and they only said that he had to reach the Cup to be considered the winner. They didn't mention how.

Inwardly chuckling at the Wizarding World's stupidity, he began burning his way towards the center of the maze where the Triwizard Cup was waiting to be claimed.

The moment Harry's dot seemed to appear in a different row for the second time, Hermione almost broke out in laughter. She had been trying to wheedle his plan out of him for weeks but all she got was that sly smile of his and a peck on the cheek.

Sirius thought that his map was malfunctioning when Harry's dot seemed to melt through a wall for the second time. It took a few seconds before he figured it out. 'This was a prank worthy of his father. Now all we have to do is train him to be an Animagus.' Sirius thought proudly as he watched Harry's dot slip through another wall. He focused on Harry's path and noticed that he was heading right for the giant spider.

Harry knew that there was only one more hedgerow to pass through before he reached the cup. His problem lay in how to deal with the very large Acromantula on the other side. He stretched out his magical senses fully and began burning his way through the final hedge. When the hole was large enough, he peered into the next chamber.

The giant spider was already moving towards him. Sighing in resignation, Harry leveled his wand at the large insect and took aim. He thought, 'Aranea Exanimus.' as the spider bore down on him. There was a brilliant flash of white as the beam shot out of his wand and hit the spider right between the eyes.

There was a loud crashing noise as its lifeless body thudded to the ground. Bits of dirt and grass were sent flying from the spider's momentum.

Ironically, Voldemort taught this spell to him inadvertently in his second year. Translated, it meant lifeless spider. 'How appropriate.'

Harry thought sardonically as he looked at the lifeless arachnid in front of him. He didn't feel nearly as bad for killing the spider compared to the dragon. The oversized arachnids were definitely on his list after they had tried to eat him and Ron during his second year. Harry's disgust and disappointment came from the fact that he had killed something in each task.

Turning his attention fully to his surroundings, Harry noticed that there was so much magic emanating from the Cup that he didn't know what to do. His skill at sensing magic was still developing and he lacked the experience to identify spells and enchantments quickly.

Slowly, Harry circled the plinth that supported the Triwizard Cup, looking for any signs of a trap. Ruefully, he thought, 'The problem with ancient artifacts is that they are so heavily magical that it could take me weeks or months to figure out the magic on this blasted Cup.'

Remus Lupin had finally reached his old office, which the unconscious imposter had obviously been using for quite some time if he was able to fool Dumbledore for so long. He ended the Disillusionment Charm and was pleased to see the black and blue bruise already forming where he had slugged Crouch.

He sat the figure down in a chair and conjured ropes that bound the prisoner tightly. With nothing to do but wait, Remus sat down in another chair to watch for the signs that the Polyjuice Potion was wearing off. He didn't have to wait long; it seemed that Crouch had forgotten to take another dose to continue the charade.

When the transformation was completely reversed, Remus sat there shocked and a little bit dismayed. Growling in disgust, he began removing everything that was on Crouch's person. When everything magical had been removed, Remus performed a Switching Spell on Barty's clothes with a blanket that he had conjured.

Satisfied that Crouch wouldn't be moving at all, he enervated him.

Barty realized almost immediately that something was very wrong. For one, he could see out of both eyes normally and wiggle both of

his feet. He knew that he was in his office at Hogwarts, tied naked to a chair, unable to move. Looking up, he saw the face of a man that he didn't want to. He was hoping to see Albus Dumbledore if he were caught, not Remus Lupin.

There was something in Lupin's eyes that made him feel like a cornered animal. Involuntarily, he gulped in his nervousness.

In a low growl, Remus said, "Hello, Barty. You look very healthy for a dead man. We really need to chat but I'm afraid that I'm rather short on time and I'm all out of Veritaserum at the moment."

Crouch sneered up at Lupin and said, "You'll get nothing from me, werewolf. My Lord shall come for me and he will reward me above all others."

'He's insane,' Remus thought resignedly, 'this is going to make this a bit easier then.' His voice still held that hard edge as he spoke, "Oh, you're going to talk, one way or the other."

Pulling out his wand, Remus conjured a hammer and held it up to show the Death Eater. "Do you know what this is?" Not waiting for an answer, he continued, "It's a hammer. Non-magical people use them for building and breaking things."

Barty laughed at Remus in his insanity before he cackled out, "I'm not afraid of some muggle tool. Get buggered you tame were..."

He never got to finish his rant because Remus swung the hammer with enough force that it shattered Crouch's left big toe upon impact. Instead, his howls of pain echoed through room.

Remus gave the howling man a few moments to wallow in pain before he spoke in a voice that promised more pain very soon, "You have nine more toes to go. Every time you don't answer me, I'm going to crush another one. Now, what does Voldemort want with this tournament?"

Crouch was having a hard time focusing through his pain. 'This wasn't supposed to happen;' he thought miserably, 'Dumbledore

wouldn't do this to me.' In desperation, he cried out, "Get Dumbledore and I'll tell you everything!" He noticed that the look upon Lupin's face when he mentioned Dumbledore was very out of place for one of the members of the Order of the Phoenix.

Remus' voice was low, he let some of the wolf come to the surface as he spoke in a menacing tone, "Oh, I assure you, Dumbledore won't be coming to talk to you. He doesn't even know that you are here." Leaning down next to Crouch, he hefted the hammer again and said, "Do you feel like talking yet?"

The threat was simple; talk or get pummeled again. When Lupin drew back his arm to swing, he cried out in panic, "WAIT! The Dark Lord wants Potter for something. I turned the Triwizard Cup into a Portkey and was supposed to assist him to win the task."

Remus was feeling a very strong sense of foreboding in the pit of his stomach. 'Harry was already in the maze!' flew through his mind. His fist lashed out, almost of its own accord, and smashed Crouch across the jaw. There was a sickening crunch and the man slumped against his bonds, unconscious.

"Dobby!" Remus cried.

There was a pop and Harry's elf was standing before him.

"Take this man and everything in this room. Put him into my cage in the basement of Sirius's house and the items into the parlor. He betrayed Harry to Voldemort." Remus said angrily.

The look of fury on Dobby's face was fearsome. He snapped his tiny fingers and the items around the room began packing themselves. Dobby looked up at Remus and coolly said, "I will take care of this, sir."

"Please don't tell Winky, that is her old master. We can tell her together." Remus said in a hurry as he was heading for the door.

With a nod in acceptance, Dobby grabbed the Death Eater and vanished from Hogwarts.

Remus pulled out his map and began searching for Harry's dot. When he found it, his heart began to race in fear. Harry was already at the Cup! "Bollocks!" he muttered as he tapped his wand on Harry's dot, alerting everyone that there was a problem with Harry.

"Expecto Patronum!" Remus said, and then he watched as a magnificent timber wolf erupted from the tip of his wand.

It stood there, waiting for instructions, so Remus spoke hurriedly, "Dora, Harry is in trouble. The Cup is a Portkey!" The Patronus zoomed out of the room heading for Tonks after receiving its instructions.

Remus ran as fast as he could towards the Quidditch Pitch, praying that one of them would make it to Harry in time.

Tonks was just making her circuit of the perimeter when Remus' Patronus appeared and gave her the message. "Shite!" she yelped as she drew her wand and ran into the maze. Taking a page from Harry's book, she began blasting the hedgerows apart in desperation to get to him.

Sirius saw Harry's dot illuminate on his map and he bolted from his spot under the stands. Since he was fairly close to the starting area, he ran into the maze and began following Harry's scent.

Hermione saw Sirius dart into the maze from his hiding spot. Looking down at the map, she noticed Harry's dot flashing up at her. Ms. Tonks was moving thorough the maze towards Harry and Remus was still not back on the map.

She wasn't getting any feelings of panic from Harry. She could sense his confusion and wariness though. Deciding that she would only get in the way in the maze, she began scanning the area for Professor McGonagall.

Albus Dumbledore was watching the maze with interest. 'Why was Mr. Potter circling the Cup?' He was startled from his thoughts when he

saw Sirius Black in his Animagus form come tearing out from underneath the stands and run straight into the maze.

Quickly scanning the sky, Dumbledore didn't see any red sparks marking a champion in trouble. Realizing that they obviously knew something that he didn't, he began to make his way down to the maze. He saw Remus running flat out towards the maze so he picked up his pace to meet him at the entrance.

Remus saw Dumbledore heading straight towards him, looking concerned but determined. Not willing to stop because time was of the essence, he ran right by a shocked Dumbledore and into the maze in search of Harry.

Hermione finally found Professor McGonagall sitting with a few of the other professors. Her voice held a pleading note to it when she spoke, "Professor, Harry is in trouble. He needs help now."

Minerva looked over at her favorite student. She was about to dismiss her concerns when she realized that Miss Granger was not one to spout a load of tripe. When she saw Remus Lupin run into the maze right past the Headmaster, she said, "Very well. Follow me and we will see if we can get to the bottom of this."

Harry stepped in front of the Cup. He was running out of time if he wanted to win this blasted tournament before another champion showed up. He was just reaching out to grab the Cup when a woman's voice rang out from his left.

"Harry, STOP!" Tonks screamed when she saw him reaching for the Triwizard Cup.

Her shout startled him and as he spun to face her, his hand grazed the handle of the Cup. There was a mighty jerking sensation behind his navel and the stadium vanished in a swirl of color as he was Portkeyed away.

Tonks stood there open mouthed in shock. The very thing that she was hoping to prevent had happened anyway when she startled Harry.

Sirius had just entered the enclosure to see Harry Portkeyed away. In his despair, he threw back his head and howled a mournful note.

Remus skidded to a stop next to Sirius and slumped to his knees when he realized that they were too late. He felt as if he had failed Harry all over again.

Dumbledore carefully stepped through the hole that someone had burned through the hedge. The scene that greeted him was worrisome. There was a dead Acromantula a few feet from the hole that he had just stepped through, Remus Lupin, Sirius Black in his Animagus form, and Nymphadora Tonks all had looks of despair on their faces.

He had numerous questions running through his mind as he cautiously made his presence known. Slowly, he walked over to where they were all gathered. In a soft voice, he asked, "What happened here? Where is Mr. Potter?"

Professor McGonagall and Hermione had just entered the area through the same hole as Professor Dumbledore when they heard his question.

Remus shot to his feet in a towering rage. His eyes were a brilliant shade of amber. The wolf had finally broken free. He strode over to Dumbledore and growled out, "Voldemort has Harry." He ignored the gasps from Hermione and Minerva and continued in a menacing tone, "This is what happens when you use people like pawns and young men as bait!"

Pleadingly, Dumbledore said, "Remus..."

The angry werewolf cut him off in mid sentence, "Merlin help you if something happens to Harry." His fury spent, Remus stepped over to Hermione and pulled her into a hug and said softly, "We will do everything that we can to find him."

Hermione felt as if her world were crashing down around her. She knew that Harry's scar had been bothering him all day but there wasn't anything that they could have done about it at the time.

A dry sob wracked her body as she desperately clung to Remus. She had sensed fear and anxiety from Harry when he was Portkeyed away.

She was just about to speak when pain, terror, and revulsion, flooded through their bond from Harry. Her heart clenched tightly in her chest and she knew that Harry had just come face to face with Voldemort. She latched onto Remus even tighter, praying that Harry would return to her safely.

Sirius was seconds away from reverting to human form when four new people stepped into the area. Resigned to waiting, he strode over and lay down at the feet of Hermione and Remus.

Fleur Delacour was helping Cedric guide a very disoriented Viktor Krum into the clearing. When they had him resting comfortably on the ground, they made their way over to Professor Dumbledore.

Minister Fudge had followed Dumbledore into the maze a minute later when he didn't return. He noticed that all of the Champions were accounted for, except Harry Potter. 'What a political nightmare if the boy is dead.' He thought to himself. His only concern was for his position, not the boy.

He waddled over to the assembled group of people and said in his nasal tone, "What is going on here, Dumbledore?"

No one had even noticed the Minister's approach because they were so wrapped up with what had just happened.

Dumbledore turned to face the pawn of Lucius Malfoy. His voice was full of concern as he spoke, "Voldemort has taken Harry Potter."

The news was quite the shocker for Fleur, Cedric, and Fudge. If it were true, all of their notions about being safe were gone.

After a few tense seconds, Fudge blurted out, "What are you talking about, Dumbledore? Everyone knows that You-Know-Who is dead. Now tell me what happened to the Potter boy!"

A tall, thin, woman in Aurors Robes answered his question before Dumbledore could speak.

Tonks was fuming, Harry was missing, maybe even dead, and Minister Fudge refused to see reason. Angrily, she said, "Minister, I saw Harry Potter touch the Triwizard Cup. It was a Portkey. Voldemort has him and we need to do everything in our power to get him back."

Staring at the auror in front of him in incredulity, Fudge said heatedly, "Absolute rubbish. This is probably the work of Sirius Black. Everyone knows that he betrayed the Potters. The tournament is the perfect cover for that insane murderer to finish off the job he started thirteen years ago."

Sirius, still in his dog form, growled a low and threatening note at the minister. Before he could attack, a strong hand grabbed his collar.

Remus said, "Down, Padfoot. He'd probably give you a stomach ache."

Fudge had backed up when the large dog growled at him.

Dumbledore shot Fudge a look of disbelief before he turned and said, "I am afraid that all we can do now is wait." He was hoping that Harry would get lucky and finish off Voldemort again. He knew that there was a chance that Voldemort had made more than one Horcrux, it was something that he would have done if he were him.

When Harry realized that the Cup was a Portkey, he tried to let go. Instead, he found that this Portkey trip was very different from his last one; his hand was stuck to the Cup.

Upon arrival, he was slammed into the ground. Unfortunately, he grazed his head on a gravestone during his tumble. He was trying to

clear the cobwebs from his mind when he noticed a very familiar figure walking towards him with a tiny bundle in his arms.

Shakily, he brought his wand up and pointed it at Peter Pettigrew and hissed, "What do you want, traitor?" His voice held a combination of hatred and pain towards the rat of a man in front of him.

Pettigrew kept walking towards Harry, his wand in one hand and the tiny form of his master in the other.

Harry's scar exploded in pain when Wormtail was about fifteen feet from him.

Voldemort was pushing on their connection with all of his strength to cause the boy pain. He wanted the Potter boy incapacitated because he wasn't positive that Wormtail was competent enough to get this right.

Harry's scar hurt so bad that he winced and grabbed his forehead.

In that brief moment, Wormtail struck, "Expelliarmus!" His aim was true and Harry's wand slipped from his slackened grip.

Harry tried to lunge for his wand but ropes shot out of Wormtail's wand and bound him to the gravestone that he was slumped against.

Peter knelt down and pocketed Harry's wand before gently setting his master's body on the ground in front of him. He then turned to fetch the necessary items for the ritual to restore his Lord to a body.

While Pettigrew was pushing a large cauldron over to the fire pit, Voldemort was studying the boy that had been his downfall thirteen years ago. His voice was weak and raspy, as if his throat wasn't made for speech, "Harry Potter. We meet again."

Pushing past the pain, Harry began trying to occlude his mind. When he had regained some semblance of control, he said in a low voice, "What do you want with me?" His voice was shaking with the effort of blocking out the pain that Voldemort was trying to inflict.

The Dark Lord was looking at the Boy-Who-Lived in curiosity. He was powerful, resourceful, and if pushed, violent. According to the reports from Crouch, Jr. there was also a keen intellect hidden behind a façade. He was also a Parselmouth. Hissing his reply, Voldemort said, “You are to be the guest of honor at my rebirth. My servants will bear witness to my triumph over you before the night is through.”

Harry wanted to keep Voldemort talking. He figured that the longer they spoke, the more likely that he would either find a way to escape or someone would send help if they could find him.

He glanced over to see how Wormtail was doing with the giant cauldron that he was moving towards the fire. Realizing that he was running out of time fast, Harry asked Voldemort a question that had been bothering him since he found out why he was famous, “Why me?”

Voldemort was surprised by this question, “Surely, you know why I tried to kill you?” Not receiving an answer, he continued in his tiny, snakelike voice, “We are fated, tied together by a prophecy.” He paused, not wanting to give the boy any more information than absolutely necessary.

Deciding upon a plan, Voldemort continued, “Didn’t Dumbledore tell you the prophecy? He was the one that heard it after all.” He was focusing on the boy’s facial features, looking for anything he could use. He wasn’t disappointed, fury flashed through their connection and across Harry Potter’s face.

Voldemort had been aware of the connection since he had constructed this rudimentary body. He wasn’t strong enough to take advantage of it yet, but he would be soon.

The smile that graced the tiny creature’s face was horrifying. If Harry could have recoiled, he would have. His fragile hold on his Occlumency Shields shattered when Voldemort told him that Dumbledore had known all along why but had never told him. His inner turmoil was so great that he never noticed Wormtail pick up the tiny form of Voldemort and drop him into the cauldron.

The splash startled him back to attentiveness. He was watching with rapt attention as Wormtail levitated a bone from the grave of Tom Riddle, Sr. and dropped it into the cauldron. He had missed what was said but Harry knew enough about rituals to know that each step was very important.

When Wormtail slashed off his own hand as a sacrifice, panic began to well up inside of him. Desperately, he thought, ‘What would the ritual require from me? Can I disrupt the ritual somehow?’ He was desperately trying to come up with a plan to escape the awful mess he was in.

Peter clutched his arm to his chest and turned towards Harry to complete the ritual that would restore his master to a proper body. His voice was shaky, and full of pain, as he stammered out, “Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken, you will resurrect your foe.”

Before Wormtail could slash him with that wicked looking dagger, Harry said, “I give my blood freely to resurrect my foe.”

Peter paused, unsure of what to do. He was panicking now. The ritual had to be completed; there was no turning back once it was started. He stepped up and slashed Harry’s left forearm and collected the blood on the blade.

When Wormtail dropped the blood into the cauldron, Harry’s scar exploded in pain. However, it was familiar to him and he instinctively knew what to do. Reaching out with his magic, he began to tear at the tendrils of dark magic that was connected to his scar.

With a massive effort, Harry snapped the remaining tendrils free from his scar. The pain was immense and he screamed aloud in pain as he felt something leave his body. Right before he passed out, saw the naked body of Voldemort rising up from the cauldron, alive and looking directly at him.

Voldemort stepped forward and pulled on a robe and picked up his wand. He felt the familiar rush of magic rushing through his veins as he was re-united with his wand after thirteen long years.

Slowly, he turned to survey the scene in front of him. Harry Potter was slumped, unconscious, on the ground next to the Triwizard Cup. Wormtail was huddled on his knees, trying to bow down before his master.

Voldemort began taking stock of his new body. There was something that was slightly off. He couldn't feel his connection to Harry Potter. There were other small differences that he was becoming aware of. First, he had no hair, anywhere. He figured that it was from the reptilian construct that he had inhabited for so long. It was a small price to pay for a new body.

Second, his eyes were different somehow. His vision wasn't changed, but something was a touch off. Waving his wand, Voldemort conjured a mirror to look at himself.

Overall, he looked human with the exception of his eyes and nose. They definitely had a reptilian quality to them. His eyes were slits and his pupils were ringed in red. His nose was gone; in its place were two long slits, just like a snake's nose. 'Minor flaws that I will repair later after extensive research.' He thought idly as he examined his fingers.

With a wave of his wand, he concealed his true features behind a Glamour Charm. He now looked just like he did at the height of his powers but without the damage done by all of the dark rituals. In short, he looked like the perfect picture of a handsome, pureblood, head of house. His hair was a longish dark brown and his eyes their old shade of blue green.

When he spoke for the first time in his new body, he noticed that his voice had a sibilant quality to it that he liked, "Wormtail, give me your arm."

Immediately, Peter held out his left arm, the Dark Mark was plainly visible after being faded for so many years. "My Lord?" he asked.

Voldemort was looking at the mark on Wormtail's arm. The Dark Mark was one of his finest creations. It tied him to his servants so that he

was always able to call upon them and they could alert him in an emergency.

The mark burned black on Wormtail's arm when Voldemort pressed the tip of his wand to it. He tilted his head back and closed his eyes, feeling the links re-establishing themselves after being dormant for so long.

Within minutes, black cloaked figures wearing white masks began Aparating into the graveyard, responding to their master's call. They began arranging themselves in a semi circle around their Lord, kneeling, while awaiting his acknowledgement.

Voldemort stood in the center of his followers, slowly turning to regard each one as he counted their number. There were three at Hogwarts and one of those was a dead man walking, one was a hero, and the other was in a grey area that would be defined later.

He could sense fear, apprehension, and guilt coming from the group in front of him. In a voice full of menace, Voldemort hissed, "How is it that my lowliest servant managed to find me when the rest of you couldn't?"

It was a question that had been bothering him for a while now. The answer that he came up with was that they didn't try very hard as the years went by.

Crabbe, Sr. couldn't take the silence anymore and he nervously spoke, "My Lord, we tried to find you but we couldn't."

Voldemort's wand lashed out, quick as a striking snake, and he snarled, "Crucio!"

Crabbe immediately fell to the ground screaming in anguish. Thirteen years as a wraith had not dulled the Dark Lord's power or wrath.

The screams woke Harry from unconsciousness. When he opened his eyes he was greeted with the sight of Voldemort torturing someone.

He realized that no one was watching him. They were all caught up in the spectacle in front of them. Quickly, Harry transformed into his Animagus form and slipped his bonds. He moved as quietly, and slowly, as he could. Once he was behind a gravestone, he transformed back.

It was the longest that he had been able to stay in his animal form yet and he was exhausted. Something felt different about his Animagus form since the first task. He also noticed that his connection to Voldemort was gone. Harry figured that he would ponder those things if he got out of this mess alive.

Realizing that Wormtail still had his wand, Harry drew the dragon tooth dagger from its sheath. Cautiously, he peered around the gravestone to look for the traitor.

Peter looked up from his spot on the ground. He had been completely forgotten by his Lord in all of the commotion. His stump was still bleeding and he was in terrible pain. His gaze drifted over to where Harry had been tied up, only the ropes remained to his shock and dismay. Quickly, he stammered out, "M-My Lord! The Potter boy is missing!"

Voldemort ended the curse on the screaming man at his feet. He was furious, through clenched teeth, he snapped, "Find him, NOW!" His eyes fell upon the area where the boy had been, he couldn't have gotten far.

"Wormtail, come here." When the rat of a man stumbled over to him, Voldemort said in a deadly whisper, "Find the boy. I want him alive. Do not return without him." With a quick wave of his wand, he stopped the bleeding and created a silver hand to replace the one that had been sacrificed to give him a body.

The Death Eaters began to spread out to find the Boy-Who-Lived. Unfortunately, two of them were heading towards Harry's position. One of them was Wormtail and the other was the man that was being tortured moments ago.

Coming up with a quick plan, Harry transformed again and coiled himself up in a shadow. When both men had passed him by, he began to slowly move after Wormtail. He needed his wand back if he were going to get out of this nightmare.

Peter was frantically searching behind the larger gravestones searching for Harry. The implied threat from the Dark Lord could only mean pain in his future if he failed. Lost in his thoughts, he wasn't paying attention to his surroundings or he might have noticed the large snake coming up behind him.

Harry struck quickly, his fangs sinking deep into Wormtail's calf. The bite caused the tiny man to scream in pain and fall down. Before he could turn around, Harry had reverted to his human form.

Screaming in pain, Wormtail dropped his wand and clutched at his leg as he fell. Suddenly, Harry Potter was standing right over him, holding a knife poised to strike again.

Harry took a quick step forward and kicked Wormtail as hard as he could in the face, knocking him unconscious. He could hear the shouts from the other Death Eaters as they tried to locate their fallen comrade. He plucked his wand from Wormtail's robes and pocketed the traitor's.

He had only gone a few more steps when he heard a voice that made his blood run cold.

Voldemort had seen Wormtail go down, clutching his leg, while screaming in pain. In the next instant, Harry Potter was standing over him with a knife in hand. 'Where had the boy come from?' he thought curiously as he began making his way towards his fallen servant.

He watched as Harry Potter lashed out with his boot, knocking Wormtail unconscious, before he spoke in his low sibilant tone, "Leaving so soon, Harry? We still have much to discuss."

Turning around slowly so he didn't startle Voldemort, Harry was shocked to see an older version of the Tom Riddle that he had met in the Chamber of Secrets. Putting two and two together, he realized

that Voldemort was hiding his true form beneath a glamour. He would try to figure out why later.

Trying to sound as relaxed as he could, Harry's voice was an even tone as he spoke, "Yes, I think that my part in this ritual is over don't you?"

Before Voldemort could reply, Wormtail started to convulse on the ground. White foam was spewing from his mouth as his body was wracked with spasms. With a last gasp, Peter Pettigrew died.

Amused, Voldemort's low voice rang out, "I'm impressed, Harry. May I call you Harry?" Not bothering to wait for a reply, he continued speaking, "I didn't think that you would resort to a poisoned dagger to kill Wormtail. Didn't Dumbledore teach you better than that?"

He was trying to provoke the boy's anger to get a better measure of his powers. Crouch's reports had been very insightful, but there was no substitute for first hand experience.

Harry was shocked; he didn't realize that his Animagus form was poisonous. Belatedly, he realized that with Wormtail dead, he would have to bring the body back with him if he escaped to clear Sirius.

Voldemort knew that Harry needed Wormtail's body to clear Sirius Black so he decided to prevent it from ever happening. Quick as lightning, he incinerated Wormtail's body. When the magical fire burned out, there was nothing but ash left of Peter Pettigrew.

"No!" Harry shouted when Voldemort lit Wormtail's body on fire. He realized that Voldemort had just removed any chance of ever clearing Sirius. Angrily, he shouted, "You bastard!" With a flick of his wrist, Harry sent a silent Blasting Hex at Voldemort with as much power as he could muster.

Voldemort's eyes widened in surprise as the spell impacted upon his hastily conjured shield, sending him flying backwards. The force of the spell was immense. Crouch had been unable to give him an exact idea of Harry Potter's full power, plus it had been cast silently. All of this went through Voldemort's mind in a fraction of a second before

he Disapparated in mid-air. He reappeared in almost the exact spot that he had been standing moments before.

The only problem was that Harry Potter was no longer standing where he had been.

As soon as his spell hit Voldemort, Harry sprinted in the opposite direction trying to put as much distance between them as he could. The familiar sound of Apparition told him that Voldemort was not injured. Suddenly, a thought hit him; he had Apparated before as a child when Dudley and his gang were chasing him at school.

Concentrating as hard as he could, Harry thought of the first place that came to mind. With a thunderous clap, Harry Apparated away from the graveyard to the only place where he felt safe.

Voldemort's howl of rage echoed through the graveyard and sent shivers down the spines of his followers as they approached their master.

## Chapter 25: Agenda's.

Dumbledore looked over at the assembled group at the center of the maze. It was a very diverse representation of most aspects of Wizarding Society. 'A society that is going to have to band together to make sacrifices in order to defeat Voldemort.' He thought idly.

Deciding that the upcoming conversation would be best suited for someplace private, Dumbledore said, "Why don't we all head up to my office to discuss the situation." He turned and headed out of the maze, a quiet, thoughtful, group trailing behind him sedately.

When he reached the entrance of the maze, Dumbledore stopped and turned to face the gathered crowd. He used the Sonorous Charm and began speaking in an upbeat tone, "Ladies and gentleman, Harry Potter has won the Triwizard Tournament." The applause from the Hogwarts students was loud, but it was thunderous from the Gryffindors. When the applause had died down, Dumbledore continued, "Please head up to the Great hall for the awards ceremony and the following party."

Dumbledore waited for everyone to begin filing from the stadium before he began leading the group up to his office. It was easier to blend in with the crowd to hide the fact that Harry Potter was not among them.

When they reached the confines of his office, Dumbledore conjured chairs for everyone and proceeded to seat himself behind his desk. He lamented that 'It's a shame that Minerva removed the charms from Mr. Potter. They would have been ideal for locating him.'

After a few more minutes silence, an annoyed Remus finally snapped, "This is getting us no where. Albus, why don't you send your Phoenix to find Harry?"

Before Dumbledore could answer, Hermione blurted out excitedly, "Of course. Fawkes helped Harry in the Chamber of Secrets!" Expectantly, she looked over at the Headmaster, only to be disheartened by the solemn look on his weathered face.

Resigned, Dumbledore admitted, "I am afraid that Fawkes will not be able to locate Mr. Potter in the same manner as before." He deliberately didn't explain the reasons why in the hopes that Cornelius wouldn't find out that he and Harry were at odds with each other.

"Why not, Albus? You use him to send messages to people all of the time." Minerva McGonagall asked in confusion. She had witnessed Fawkes deliver messages to various people over the years.

Hermione was looking shrewdly at the headmaster. She was putting the pieces together about what Dumbledore hadn't said earlier. She narrowed her eyes at him when she realized that his statement was really about Harry's lack of faith in him, not the Phoenix's lack of ability at finding someone.

Dumbledore caught the look on Hermione's face and realized that he had to do something quickly or she would expose that secret to Fudge. Returning to his doting grandfather voice, he said, "Of course, Minerva. That merely slipped my mind." He turned his back to everyone and quickly penned a short missive to Harry, while silently spelling the note into a Portkey. When he was finished, he turned to Fawkes and said, "Please take this to Harry Potter and wait for a reply if he is not in danger. If he is, bring him here at once."

He knew that everyone would see through the ruse except for the ones that it was put on for. Fudge and the three Triwizard Champions needed to believe that he would take care of things. The last thing that he wanted was for Fudge to get wind of the rift between himself and Mr. Potter. That could lead to Lucius Malfoy using Fudge to make inroads into Harry Potter's life. It was something that he desperately wanted to avoid, especially with the darker path that the boy had been traveling lately.

Hermione stood up abruptly, she had an idea but it was not something that she wanted anyone other than Remus, Sirius, and perhaps Ms. Tonks to hear. In a shaky voice, she said, "Headmaster, would it be alright if Mr. Lupin escorted me out for a bit? I need to take a walk to help me calm down."

Dumbledore gave her a calculating look, he knew that she must have some type of idea but she didn't want to expose whatever secret she was protecting in mixed company. Deciding that he would rather have Harry Potter back safe and sound, rather than know her secret, he replied, "Of course, Ms. Granger. Do you want anyone else to go with you?"

She answered immediately so no one else would volunteer, "No thank you, sir." She proceeded to the door with Remus and Sirius in his Animagus form following her. Hermione figured that if they left behind Ms. Tonks they would hear everything that was said later.

Quickly, she made her way to the Room of Requirement and thought about a secure location. When the door appeared, she led them inside.

While they were walking towards the Room, she had gotten a fresh wave of feelings from Harry. She sensed his relief, exhaustion, and remorse from the ordeal. During the third task and beyond, she had been clamping down on her feelings, only letting her love and support pour through so she wouldn't distract him. Now that she knew he was safe, she let the other feelings flow through their bond as well.

Turning to the perplexed duo, she said, "Harry is fine. My guess is that he is at my parent's house, the library to be specific." Seeing the questioning looks on the two men's faces, she continued, "Please hold your questions about how I know until we are with Harry and my parents." She paused and then called out, "Dobby!"

With a small pop, the tiny little elf appeared in front of them and said despondently, "Hello, Miss. How may I assist you?"

Hermione said in a kind voice, "Can you take us to my parent's house please? Harry is there."

Dobby immediately perked up in relief when his mistress confirmed Master Harry's safety. His relief was audible in his tiny voice when he spoke, "It would be my pleasure! I will have to make two trips though." He clasped hands with Hermione and Sirius and vanished from Hogwarts before quickly reappearing to grab Remus.

Voldemort's rage at the boy's escape quickly turned to cold calculation. 'Perhaps it is better if the boy is free to confront Dumbledore and divide the attention directed towards my activities.' he thought idly as he twirled his wand through his fingers.

He needed time to reassess what had happened this evening. Something had gone wrong, he could feel it. He felt different somehow, more whole than he had before.

The death of Wormtail would not be a loss. Voldemort knew that only one other person knew what he looked like without the glamour, Harry Potter. The incompetent fool of a servant would never have been able to keep that a secret. He had planned on killing the idiot before the night was through anyway; Potter had just done the job for him. Now the only one with the correct information about the ritual would be the boy and he decided that he would worry about that later.

Turning his attention to his assembled Death Eaters, he said in his low sibilant tone, "Lucius make sure that Fudge thinks that all of this was the work of Sirius Black. I want him so hunted that he will either be killed or kissed by Dementors on sight."

Shifting his focus to McNair, he hissed out, "Black's Animagus form is similar to a large black Grim. Quietly spread that around the law enforcement division."

Voldemort paused in thought, he knew things would move quickly and he wanted to be prepared as best as he could. Stepping up some of his plans would work to his advantage. "We will free our comrades in Azkaban by the end of the week and Black will take the blame for that as well. Anyone not given a specific assignment is to be working on this plan as well as gathering information inside the Ministry of Magic. If you have a clear chance to use the Imperious Curse and not get caught, do it. The only ones I don't want touched are Fudge and his immediate staff. They are going to do all of our dirty work on their own under Lucius' influence. That way if we need to pin something on them later, we can."

Lucius Malfoy stepped forward and kneeled down before Voldemort. His aristocratic voice was crisp, even behind the white mask, as he spoke, "My Lord, my family would be honored if you were to take up residence at our family manor."

"Thank you, Lucius. Your offer is most kind but I must decline." Seeing the confused and disappointed look in his servant's eyes, he continued in a lecturing tone, "Dumbledore suspects you of being a Death Eater. No, I will require a safer place to call home. I need someplace where Dumbledore would never suspect me to reside. Now, arise, Lucius and see to your assignment."

Turning to gaze at the rest of his followers, he hissed out, "Begin your tasks. I will contact everyone in a few days. I want Dumbledore looking for me. Do nothing to tip your hand to him or the Order of the Phoenix."

Focusing on the entrance to the Ministry of Magic, Voldemort turned on the spot and vanished with only the softest of pops to mark his departure.

Annabelle Granger was lying in the window seat of their library, reading, when a thunderous clap startled her from her isolation. She gazed up in time to see Harry fall to his hands and knees with a groan. Urgently, she cried out, "JOHN! Get in here. Harry just appeared out of no where!"

Her book forgotten, she rushed over to the fallen teen, her mothering instincts kicking in. Softly, so as not to startle him, she reached out and lightly touched his shoulder as she crouched down in front of him. Her voice was full of concern as she spoke softly, "Harry? Are you alright?"

When he looked up at her, she gasped. The look of despair on his face and in his eyes was something that should never grace the visage of a young boy. She held her arms open to him, and to her surprise, he practically launched himself into her embrace.

That was how John Granger found them two of them when he rushed into the library followed closely by the tiny form of Winky.

Harry was crying silently, more in relief than anything. His silent sobs and shaking shoulders told a tale that concerned both adults.

John's voice was soft, yet apprehensive, when he finally spoke from his spot on the floor next to them, "Are you okay? Is Hermione alright?"

Harry lifted his head to meet Mr. Grangers. Tilting his head slightly to the side in concentration, he croaked out, "Yes, she's fine." He paused a moment and closed his eyes while focusing on Hermione, "She is anxious and I think that she is on her way here."

Before either of them could question his statements, there was a pop and Dobby appeared with Hermione and Sirius.

Hermione cried out in relief, "Harry!" as she rushed forward to embrace him.

Annabelle had sat back to let her daughter hug Harry. She was a bit shocked by this turn of events.

John was reaching towards his wife when he noticed the blood covering her side where Harry's arm had wrapped around her. Very calmly, he said, "Winky, please fetch my first aid kit, Harry is injured."

That simple statement sparked everyone into action.

Hermione immediately held Harry at arms length so she could get a good look at him.

Sirius stepped over to the two teens and gently separated them while saying softly, "Harry, lie down so we can check you over for injuries."

Annabelle was silently berating herself for missing any signs of injury when Harry first appeared. He wasn't in any obvious pain and his clothes were too dark to show any blood.

Before any of them could get too deep into their examinations, Harry croaked out, "My left arm was slashed with a ritual knife and I banged

my head on a gravestone when the Portkey slammed me into the ground."

Dobby had just returned with Remus in time for both of them to hear Harry's explanation of his injuries.

Remus stepped over to Harry's prone form and knelt down next to his pseudo nephew, "Let me see your arm please, Harry."

Slowly, and very carefully, Harry pulled up his left sleeve. There was a long cut where the blade had sliced through the skin. It was fairly deep and still bleeding slightly.

Everyone was a bit surprised that Harry hadn't said anything sooner about the injury. It was obviously painful but he didn't as much as flinch when he rolled up his sleeve.

Tentatively, Remus asked, "Harry, you said that the cut was from a ritual knife?" When Harry nodded yes, he continued speaking calmly, "I'm afraid that it's going to leave a scar. I can heal it but that wound is highly magical."

Harry mumbled softly under his breath, his voice was resigned and bitter, "What's one more scar for the collection?"

Everyone had heard him clearly but no one quite knew how to respond to his comment so they all stayed quiet while Remus healed the wound. A long thin purple scar was left behind as a permanent reminder of Harry's horrifying experience as part of Voldemort's resurrection.

Hermione had been holding Harry's right hand the entire time that Remus was healing the wound. She could feel a change in him, and in their bond. He felt stronger magically and their bond was deeper, clearer than before. She looked up into his beautiful green eyes and found him looking directly back at her. The same thoughts were mirrored in their thoughtful expressions.

Annabelle had been watching the interaction between Harry and Hermione. Something was different from before. They were close

when they had visited last time, now they seemed to be able to sense each other and their thoughts. Curious, she said aloud, "How long have you two been able to sense each other's thoughts and locations?"

John, Remus, and Sirius were stunned into inactivity by her statement. When neither teen moved to disabuse the notion, they all knew that something was going on.

Sirius and Remus realized that Hermione mentioned knowing where Harry was right before Dobby brought them here, proving that she knew exactly where Harry was at the moment.

Not the most patient of men, Sirius blurted out, "Okay you two. What is going on here? Does this have to do with Voldemort's return?"

John and Annabelle were worried at the news of the Dark Lord's return. Through their long talks with Sirius, Remus, the two elves, and Dora they picked up quite a bit about the Wizarding World and Voldemort's reign of terror.

Harry and Hermione shared a look, an entire conversation passing in the blink of an eye, before Harry spoke in his low, modulated voice, "Partly, our connection became clearer after Voldemort was returned to his body."

Concerned, John asked, "What do you mean; your connection?"

This time it was Hermione who spoke. Her tone was crisp and clear, "We've been able to feel each other's emotions since just before the first task. Everything became clearer after Voldemort got his body back. Now we can tell roughly where the other is located at any given moment if we concentrate hard enough."

Deciding that it would be best to come clean before the questions started, Harry said, "As soon as I severed the dark tendrils of magic from my scar, I felt something leave me and my connection to Hermione became clearer. I wasn't able to focus on it until I was safe here though."

Turning to Hermione, Harry grasped both of her hands in his and said, "He's gone. I don't get any more flashes of his emotions and I'm positive that I heard him screaming in rage when I Apparated here."

Hermione, Remus, and Sirius were all flabbergasted. Harry had Apparated hundreds of kilometers and then through the Fidelius Charm on his first attempt while being chased by Voldemort.

Before anyone else could speak there was a brilliant flash of flames and Fawkes appeared on the mantle. He had a letter clasped in his beak and everyone was sure that it was for Harry.

Tentatively, Harry stretched out his magical senses and scanned the letter and Fawkes. The letter was magical and that concerned Harry but the feeling he got from the Phoenix was entirely different. He could feel the magical energy pouring through the beautiful bird.

Fawkes gave an indignant squawk when he felt Harry's magic wash over him. When the feeling withdrew, he ruffled his feathers to show his annoyance.

Harry said apologetically, "Sorry about that, Fawkes. I'm still learning how to control that skill." Reaching into his vest pocket, he pulled out an owl treat and offered it to the Phoenix as a gesture of peace.

Before anyone could touch the letter, Harry warned, "Don't pick up that envelope, it's highly magical. My guess is that Dumbledore made it into a Portkey." While Fawkes was munching on the treat, Harry was absent mindedly scratching the swan sized bird gently like he would with Hedwig.

He knew that Hermione was highly amused with his antics and concerned about the Portkey but he couldn't figure out why everyone else was staring at him. Confused, Harry said, "What?"

The Grangers had only seen pictures of a Phoenix before. Seeing one in person was entirely different. They felt heartened by its presence and a bit awed at Harry's comfort level with the magnificent bird.

Remus was beginning to put together the pieces of the puzzle in his mind. So many little things were falling into place now. He was amazed that he hadn't spotted it before. With a touch of envy in his voice, he said wistfully, "How long have you two been bonded?"

Annabelle's confused voice rang out, "Bonded?"

John's heart leapt into his throat upon hearing Annabelle's question. His discomfort only grew when Sirius spoke up.

"They're too young to be bonded, Remus." When neither of the teens moved to deny, or clarify, anything, Sirius slumped into a chair and mumbled, "Married at fourteen, Lily is gonna kill me."

Hermione and Harry cringed when they heard what Sirius had mumbled. Their plans for breaking this to everyone gently went up in smoke like one of Neville's potions.

Harry forestalled any more discussion on their marriage by saying, "Dumbledore wants me back at Hogwarts pretty badly. My guess is that if the Portkey didn't work, Fawkes would teleport me back. What do you think I should do?"

In all of the excitement, everyone had forgotten about the Headmaster. Annabelle could see that her husband was going to need some time to come to grips with everything. Turning to face the two teens, she said in her authoritative parent voice, "Please be safe and you will both return soon so we can talk about this bond and marriage later." She stepped over and gave each of them a hug before returning to her equally shocked husband.

Remus broke free of his stupor and said, "Harry, I think that you should go back in a few minutes. Let the three of us return to Dumbledore's office first. That way we are all there when you show up."

Harry glanced at everyone and hugged Hermione before stepping back to let Dobby bring them back to Hogwarts. He waited in uncomfortable silence with Hermione's parents for five minutes before he drew his wand and stepped over to the Portkey. With a flick

of his wrist, he incinerated the letter turned Portkey so no one would touch it by accident.

Turning to face his in-laws, he said, "I love Hermione and I would do anything to protect her. Thank you for being here for me; this was the first place that I could think of that felt safe." Facing the Phoenix, he asked, "Are you ready to take me back?"

Fawkes trilled and launched himself into the air above Harry.

Harry reached up and grabbed a handful of tail feathers and they were gone in a flash of flames leaving behind two very confused, shocked, and concerned Grangers.

Voldemort was making his way through the Ministry without any opposition. No one was looking for Tom Riddle, Jr. so he was able to move about unopposed.

There was only a skeleton crew on duty this evening due to the Triwizard Tournament's final task. That was why no one noticed a lone figure entering the Department of Mysteries on a mission.

He knew of the existence of the Hall of Prophecy, deep within the Department of Mysteries, thanks to Rookwood. He had never been able to visit the Hall before because of the heightened security due to his reign of terror. Now that everyone believed him to be dead, things had gotten lax. Voldemort saw no one during his casual walk into the Department of Mysteries.

The total lack of security made his task that much easier. He knew exactly where the Prophecy Sphere was located and when he arrived at the shelf, he reverently removed the tiny glass orb.

The unearthly voice that emanated from the sphere was both chilling and exciting at the same time. 'Finally, I will know the entire contents of the prophecy.' He thought to himself excitedly. When the prophecy was completely recited, the sphere went dark and he carefully placed it back on the shelf in the exact spot.

Voldemort didn't know whether to be angry at himself or at Severus for not hearing the entire prophecy. He had inadvertently marked Harry Potter as his equal, something that he firmly believed he didn't have before that fateful night in Godric's Hollow. The troubling part was that the boy now had a power that he didn't know. They might be magical equals now but experience was still on his side.

If the whole situation wasn't so serious, he would have broken down laughing at the idea of Sybil Trelawney giving an actual prophecy. Unfortunately, he had made it an active one by attempting to murder the Potter boy before gathering all of the facts.

As he made his way out of the Department of Mysteries, Voldemort was deep in thought about what to do about this entire mess. Prophecies were tricky things. He had activated this one but the question was; did it have to go any further? The boy may not come after him, especially if he made no further attempts on his life. The problem was that he hated having an equal, especially one that could destroy him. For now, he would let things develop and he would watch Harry Potter as close as possible.

He smiled at the night guard and waved goodbye as he left the atrium. Chuckling at the thought of what the guard's reaction would have been if he knew who had just wished him a good evening, Voldemort Apparated away to find a place to stage his operations.

Fudge was getting nervous, what was he going to do if the Boy-Who-Lived died on his watch? There was no way that Voldemort could be back no matter what these people said, he died thirteen years ago. Sirius Black was an at large, deranged killer, that he was sure was behind this entire mess. Peter Pettigrew found out, along with a street full of muggles, how insane and destructive Black could be.

Turning his attention to the Headmaster, he said in his annoyingly nasal tone, "What are we going to do, Dumbledore? Black is a mass murderer that will stop at nothing to finish the Potter boy. I know, I met him in Azkaban and he was mumbling about getting to the boy while in Hogwarts."

Just as Dumbledore was about to answer, Hermione, Remus, and Sirius in dog form returned to his office. None of them had that distressed look about them that they had before they left, so he figured that they had been successful in whatever they were doing to locate Mr. Potter.

They were all settling back into their seats when Fawkes reappeared in a flash of flames with an obviously irate Harry Potter.

Harry fixed his fiery gaze upon Dumbledore, his voice had a low melodic timbre when he spoke, "Voldemort is back."

## Chapter 26: Political Posturing.

When Dumbledore had ushered everyone up to the castle, she knew that something was amiss. There was no way that Harry Potter wouldn't have been asked to take a bow. She had stayed in her seat and watched the group with Dumbledore, scanning their midst for a sign of the youngest Champion.

Discovering his absence from their group, she followed them at a discrete distance. Hermione Granger looked anything but happy when she should have been ecstatic over his win. Something was very wrong and she realized that Harry Potter was missing. Ruefully, she thought to herself, 'It has finally begun. Nothing to do now except, wait.'

Fifteen minutes later, Hermione Granger, Remus Lupin, and a large dog that she was pretty sure was an Animagus, walked out of the Headmaster's Office looking grim. She almost missed it when Hermione Granger's steps faltered before she resumed her pace with a lighter look upon her face. 'Now, that was interesting. Is she tied to Harry Potter somehow?' she thought curiously.

She quickly decided that whatever the unlikely trio in front of her was doing, it was far more interesting than waiting in the shadows outside of Dumbledore's office. The young woman let them get half a corridor away before starting to follow, sticking to the shadows as best as she could.

Had anyone been able to see her face at that moment, it would have clearly shown confusion when she arrived to an empty hallway on the seventh floor. She knew that there was no way that they had simply disappeared so the answer was that there was a secret room around here somewhere.

Resigned, she stepped into an alcove, put up a Notice-Me-Not charm on the entrance, and sat down to wait. Surprisingly, her wait was very short. A door simply appeared on the far wall of the hall and the trio stepped out. When the door closed, it disappeared, and a blank wall remained. She decided that she would come back later to try to figure out how to get inside the mysterious room.

Taking a closer look at their faces, the young teen noticed that they all looked relieved. ‘They must have talked to Harry,’ she thought idly as she watched them head back towards the Headmaster’s Office. With these new discoveries on her mind, she slowly made her way back down to the Great Hall. Whatever was coming, it would be announced after the awards ceremony.

The silence in Albus Dumbledore’s office was complete. No person or portrait made as much as a peep. The crackling of the logs in the fire provided the only ambient noise as everyone thought about what it meant to their little world now that Harry Potter had claimed that Voldemort had returned.

If the situation weren’t so dire, Harry would have laughed aloud. As it was, he focused on Fudge’s reaction to the news. He already knew that Dumbledore wouldn’t say anything until he had thought it over for a bit.

Cornelius Fudge knew that the Potter boy was going to claim that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was back, but hearing it made it seem that much more ludicrous. There was no way that it could be true, his voice faltered as he stammered out, “No, not possible. This is the work of that lunatic, Black! Where is the Triwizard Cup?”

Inwardly sighing, Harry’s voice betrayed no emotion as he spoke, “If you would like the Cup back, just ask Voldemort, he has it or it’s still lying on the ground in some graveyard. I was a bit busy running for my life to stop and pick it up.”

Fleur, Cedric, and Viktor were listening, enraptured, as Harry told them that he had been face to face with the Dark Lord. He seemed to be telling the truth but they were still wary of it. It would wreck their little worlds and they weren’t ready for that. Like most of the Wizarding Populace, if it wasn’t staring them in the face, they preferred to ignore the situation.

Dumbledore was watching Harry, Hermione, Remus, and Fudge closely; he ignored the Champions because they would follow his lead when the time came. Remus and Hermione didn’t seem

surprised; he surmised that they had all spoken briefly somehow before everyone showed up in the office.

He crossed his fingers and slowly tapped his chin with his thumbs, lost in thought. He was trying to formulate his response in such a way that wouldn't irritate everyone present. Buying more time, he turned to the other three Triwizard Champions and said, "You may return to the Great Hall for the award ceremony and party." Giving each of them a piercing gaze, he said, "Do not speak of what happened here this evening. It could lead to dire consequences if you did."

Remus understood the threat hidden in the Headmaster's words but he doubted that any of the Champions had noticed it. 'It's impossible for them to not talk about what they heard here. Before tonight, everyone in the school will know that Harry Potter claimed that Voldemort has returned.'

Fudge was shifting colors like a kaleidoscope, white and red were the two most prevalent ones. Dumbledore figured that Fudge was warring with himself on which way to proceed. Ultimately, he knew that Fudge would only do what Lucius told him so this was mostly to allow Fudge the illusion that he actually thought for himself.

Deciding to see if he could indebt Sirius Black to him, Dumbledore said, "Minister, we have proof that Sirius Black is innocent. Peter Pettigrew was the Potter's Secret Keeper and he betrayed them to Voldemort."

Sirius, Remus, Harry, and Hermione were interested in the direction this conversation was taking. This was a blatant attempt at manipulation by Dumbledore, but if it freed Sirius, that was good enough for them. They knew enough about the Headmaster's manipulative side to ignore the fact that he wanted them indebted to them for this attempt, successful or not.

Fudge was shocked at this statement, but he quickly recovered his long-standing view on the Black situation. His voice was sarcastic as he spoke, "Really, Dumbledore. Do you happen to have Peter Pettigrew locked up? Without a body, you have no case. You know that Veritaserum isn't fool proof. One good Memory Modification

Charm and anyone would believe, under the serum's influence, that they had seen Pettigrew alive. The same goes for Pensive Memories. They can be altered or faked entirely, that is why they aren't allowed in court, and we rely mainly on eye witness accounts."

Dumbledore knew that this was a sticking point but he had thought of a way around this, "Mr. Potter, Ms. Granger, Remus Lupin, and a Mr. Ronald Weasley have all seen Pettigrew alive and well, Minister. I told you as much one year ago and yet you did nothing." He finished, pushing as much of the blame for Sirius' fugitive status onto the Minister as he could.

Harry's heart plummeted in his chest. He had effectively ensured that Sirius would never be free when he accidentally killed Wormtail in the graveyard. 'Voldemort knew what he was doing when he burned the body,' he thought bitterly as he listened to the political maneuverings. One thing was for certain, there was no way that he was going to mention a dead Pettigrew in the presence of anyone other than those he absolutely trusted.

Hermione felt the bitterness from Harry when Wormtail was mentioned and she knew it didn't bode well for Sirius.

Fudge smirked at Dumbledore and replied, "Your own Potions Professor, Severus Snape, gave a statement to Law Enforcement last year stating that Black had Confunded everyone that evening when he escaped. Their testimony is worthless and you know it. Don't waste my time without a body; I'm not going to look like a fool by bringing that up without iron clad proof."

Hermione was outraged that their justice system seemed so barbaric. However, as she thought about it, it became clear that because there were so many different magical ways to alter things, that it was almost impossible to have any real semblance of legal proceedings. Trials were useless unless there were dozens of eyewitnesses. 'Poor, Sirius.' She thought to herself when she realized why he had been sent to Azkaban without a trial, the Wizengamot felt it didn't need to bother because there were so many witnesses.

Remus was angry; he knew that Dumbledore or Fudge could have ordered a trial to confirm some of the facts. The murder of the muggles was probably a lost cause without Peter, but it could have come out that Sirius wasn't the Potter's Secret Keeper. The members of the Wizengamot didn't feel the need to explore what they considered a non-issue and Dumbledore didn't seem to expend any effort to capture Peter either. Remus' resolve to capture Wormtail alive solidified.

Harry was silently fuming again. Frustrated, he thought, 'Well, Sirius can never come in to face trial. A trial would see him sent back to Azkaban for the murders that Wormtail committed that fateful day.'

Sirius Black was sitting on the floor, trying very hard not to bite the two posturing politicians in front of him. He had never realized how thoroughly that the rat had framed him, until now. He would remain a fugitive for the rest of his long life. Resigned, he lay his head down on Harry's feet, and concentrated on what was being discussed.

Something that Harry had said was tickling his thoughts, turning to him, Dumbledore said in his kind voice, "Mr. Potter, where were taken when you were Portkeyed away?"

Harry paused a moment to gather his thoughts before answering. He didn't want to give away too much so he 'Fudged' the truth slightly to suit his needs as he spoke, "I hit my head and was knocked out when I arrived. When I woke up, Voldemort was standing in front of me and he was torturing someone in a white mask and a black robe. Pettigrew was kneeling on the ground about ten feet from me along with a half a dozen or so other figures in black robes and white masks."

Still trying to earn points with Harry, Dumbledore said, "You see, Cornelius, Mr. Potter says he saw Pettigrew and Voldemort at the same time this evening."

"Rubbish. Who knows what spells were used on this boy by Black? The Dark Lord is dead, Dumbledore. You don't just come back to life after being dead for thirteen years!" spittle was flying from the corners of Fudge's mouth as he spoke.

The research that Remus had been doing about Harry's connection flooded to the front of his thoughts from Fudge's declaration. He paled considerably when he realized what that scar on Harry's head really was, a Horcrux.

Dumbledore saw Remus stiffen out of the corner of his eye. 'Did he know something about Horcruxes?' he thought in concern. Trying to distract Remus and remain in control of the fast changing situation, he said in his kindest tone, "Harry, were you injured other than hitting your head?"

Pensively, Harry thought, 'He's looking for something, almost as if he knows what Voldemort did to regain a body.' Deciding to throw some of Dumbledore's own tactics back at him, Harry answered with a question of his own, "Do you have an idea how Voldemort got a body back?"

Fudge realized that they were ignoring him in favor of talking about a dead Dark Lord. Irritated, he snapped, "Enough of this foolishness. Mr. Potter obviously doesn't know where he was taken, or by whom, so we can close this discussion and get on with the award ceremony to close the tournament." Rising from his chair, Fudge said, "I expect all of you down in the Great Hall in fifteen minutes for the award ceremony."

As he walked down to the Great Hall, Fudge was trying to come up with an acceptable story to cover the loss of the Triwizard Cup. He never noticed the young woman standing in the shadows watching him as he strode hurriedly past, lost in thought.

The room was silent for a few minutes after the Minister left for the Great Hall. Everyone was lost in their thoughts, trying to sort out what had just been discussed.

After a few minutes, Dumbledore finally spoke, his tone was gravely serious, "What really happened this evening, Harry?"

Not willing to play games right now, Harry coolly replied, "You seem to have some thoughts on the matter, sir. Why don't you tell me how Voldemort got a new body?"

Harry just sat there, gazing around the room, thinking. He wasn't going to answer any questions without getting his own answered first.

Dumbledore was a bit surprised. Usually when people were faced with uncomfortable silences, they got nervous and started to speak. The fact that none of his guests had uttered a single word told him that they wanted answers to difficult questions. Tentatively, he spoke, "There are a number of things that Voldemort could have done to get a new body. You said that you were in a graveyard?"

Harry nodded yes, but he still wouldn't speak until he got some answers.

"There is a dark ritual that requires a few ingredients. One of them is a bone from a family member." Dumbledore paused and leaned forward in his chair, his gaze fixed only upon Harry Potter as he continued, "The other two are a willing sacrifice and blood forcibly taken. I'll ask you again, were you injured in the graveyard, Harry?"

Not really seeing a way out of this predicament, Harry answered, "Yes, Wormtail took some blood from me after he cut off his own hand." He could have sworn that a small smile seemed to pass across Dumbledore's face, but it was gone so fast he wondered if he could have imagined it.

Sirius had transformed back into his human form a few minutes after Fudge had left the room. He was having a hard time not cursing aloud when he heard Harry describe the ritual. It was going to be very hard for him to not kill that traitor, Peter, the next time that they crossed paths.

Remus knew that the ritual would have an unintended side effect if it were successful. The Horcrux inside of Harry's scar would strengthen their bond as well as provide Harry with his own version of a Horcrux. It meant that Harry would be able to come back from the dead once. Suppressing a shudder, Remus said in a low voice that was almost a

whisper, “I would like to see your research notes on that ritual, Albus. We need to know what the possible side effects are.”

Dumbledore was slightly nervous about Remus’ request. He didn’t want anyone finding out Harry was a Horcrux and that he now had a version of one himself. If the public ever got wind of that information, Harry would be labeled a Dark Lord and become hunted. The risk of him being killed before he could fulfill the prophecy was too great. Therefore, he lied, “I don’t have those books anymore. I only borrowed them and I took no notes so I wouldn’t accidentally leave directions for someone else to travel that dark path.”

Remus knew that he was being lied to. There was no way that Dumbledore had let those books go. He would just have to figure something else out in order to get the books. Resigned, he asked, “Do you have the names of the books? Perhaps I could track them down so I can do some research?”

Sighing in resignation, Dumbledore said in a regretful tone, “I’m afraid that I don’t. Those books were so old that they didn’t have titles, just leather bindings.” He made a show of pulling out his pocket watch and stood up after checking the time elapsed before speaking, “We need to head down to the Great Hall for the award ceremony.”

He beckoned them towards the door and after they had filed out, he closed it behind them and followed them down to the Great Hall in silence. Dumbledore was thankful that one possible plan that he had figured out was starting to progress properly. Voldemort had miscalculated and provided Harry with the perfect way to sacrifice himself while taking out a piece of Voldemort’s soul. The act would also remove Harry’s pseudo Horcrux from existence, as it would be used to bring him back to life.

Remus was itching to get back to the library and start researching ways to remove the Horcrux from Harry when he remembered Harry saying something about Voldemort’s presence in his mind was gone. Slightly relieved, Remus vowed to find the underlying cause of this mystery as soon as he was back at the Black ancestral home.

Harry and Hermione were holding hands on the way down to the ceremony, both lost in their thoughts about what was coming in the future. He gave her petite hand a gentle squeeze and pushed his feelings for her through the bond.

Hermione returned the gesture and smiled at him before kissing his cheek. She was relieved that he had made it back alive. She realized that things would be very different now and that Remus and Sirius were very smart to move her family ahead of time to keep them safe. Hermione was unsure what the Wizarding World's response would be to this news, however, she did know that it wasn't going to be a good one. As a society, witches and wizards were too wrapped up in their own little worlds and they would do almost everything to ignore the evidence in front of them when it disrupted their beliefs and day-to-day lives.

When they entered the Great Hall, the applause was deafening. Students, parents, and other spectators were crowded into the large room leaving only a tiny walkway up to the raised platform where the teacher's table normally sat.

Cornelius Fudge was sitting on the side of the dais next to the other three Triwizard Champions. There was no sign of Ludo Bagman but Barty Crouch, Sr.'s replacement, Percy Weasley, was there. As Harry made his way up to the stage, Remus, Sirius in dog form, and Hermione moved off towards the Gryffindor Table where Neville and Ginny were waving to them.

Once everyone was seated, Dumbledore stepped up to the lectern and began speaking, "Tonight marks the end of the Triwizard Tournament. I would like to thank everyone that helped make this event possible. This event is one steeped in history and I am glad that we were able to resurrect it with only minimal changes to the rules which proved to be a major success." He was glossing over the fact that Harry was underage but only a few people would remember that tiny footnote if he could help it.

Continuing his speech, Dumbledore said cheerfully, "Let us all give a warm round of applause for our Triwizard Champions! They have fought through difficult tasks, proven their mettle, and made their

schools, and countries, proud." He paused to let the applause die down before he resumed speaking, "It is with great pleasure that I introduce this years Triwizard Champion, Hogwarts very own Harry Potter!"

Grudgingly, Harry stood up from his chair and made his way over to where Professor Dumbledore was standing, clapping along with the crowd. When he stopped next to Dumbledore, he quietly said, "Thank you."

Dumbledore turned to face the crowd and announced, "Let's welcome our Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge to present the prize!"

The applause was lack luster at best and Fudge was internally scowling. He figured that he would use this event, and the Potter boy's prestige, to help bolster support. With a big smile on his face, Fudge stepped up to the lectern and addressed the assembled crowd, "Thank you for your kind welcome. Under my direction, the Ministry of Magic worked very hard to make this event happen. I would like to thank Beauxbatons and Durmstrang for agreeing to participate in the tournament this year. Talks are already under way for another tournament to be held at one of their fine institutions in two years and I'm sure that Hogwarts will be up to the challenge."

He paused to gauge the crowd's reaction. There was a large smattering of excited murmurs about the next tournament, continuing, he said, "To that end, we have commissioned the construction of a new trophy for the winner of the tournament. This new trophy will be passed down from victor to victor after each tournament. The winner's name, and tournament date and location, will be engraved on the base of the trophy, forever immortalizing them."

Turning to face Harry Potter, he waived the boy up to stand next to him. Excitedly, Fudge said, "It is my great honor to bestow the first place prize of one thousand galleons to Harry Potter! The new trophy will be delivered to him upon its completion and at the completion of the next tournament; Mr. Potter will pass it along to the next champion." He reached out and shook Harry Potter's hand enthusiastically for the cameras while holding out the sack of gold to him.

Harry had plastered a fake smile on his face as he accepted his prize money with a mumbled, "Thank you." He knew that there was no chance that Fudge would let him speak out of fear that he would announce Voldemort's return. Taking his prize money, he made his way down from the platform and over to the Gryffindor Table to sit next to Hermione.

Dumbledore stepped back up to the lectern and addressed the crowd, "Thus concludes the award ceremony. Now, let the party begin!" He clapped his hands and the tables filled with an assortment of drinks, food, and sweets. He didn't think that the time was right to announce Voldemort's return, yet.

By keeping things silent, Dumbledore hoped that it would make things easier to track the Death Eaters and Voldemort. The quicker that he reassembled the Order of the Phoenix, the better, and he planned to do that immediately following the ceremony.

Harry was sitting with Hermione, Remus, Neville, and Ginny while Sirius was under the table at their feet. He wanted nothing more than to leave before someone else cornered him and asked him about the tournament. He still wasn't sure if he should have alerted the entire school about Voldemort's return or not but he was pretty sure that the rumor mill would be going strong and that a large portion of the school would know by morning.

Deciding that they had lingered long enough, Harry said, "Come on, let's get out of here."

They waved goodbye to Neville and Ginny before making their way out of the Great Hall.

When they reached the Room of Requirement, Harry sealed the room and called out, "Dobby, Winky!" After the two elves appeared, he said, "Would you please move all of our things to Hermione's house? We won't be staying here at night any more. Do you think that you two will be able to bring Hermione and me back and forth to school each day?"

Dobby and Winky looked at each other before Winky replied enthusiastically, "Yes, Master Harry. We would be honored to bring you to Hogwarts and then home each day."

Relieved, Harry replied, "Thank you. Once you have taken us back home, would you retrieve our things from our dorm rooms?"

The two elves each grabbed two pairs of hands and popped back to the Grangers.

When they arrived in the entryway, Hermione turned to Harry and said worriedly, "Don't we have to stay at school during the semester?"

Everyone perked up at the question, looking forward to Harry's answer, when he spoke, "Nope. I checked the rulebook and nowhere does it mention that we have to live in the castle during the year. It is probably a tradition from hundreds of years ago when it was easier, and safer, to have magical children in one central place at all times. It doesn't make sense anymore for Hogwarts to be a boarding only school. What about the families that live in Hogsmeade? Why should they have to send their kids to live in a castle that they could walk to every morning?"

Hermione frowned in thought; she had never considered the option of commuting to school at Hogwarts. Now that they had the means to commute each day, it made much more sense and it would be a lot safer. She wouldn't admit it aloud, but she still had trouble sleeping in Gryffindor Tower. Harry knew, she couldn't keep that from him, but he was supportive and she realized that he was really doing this for her. With tears in her eyes and a smile on her face, she stepped up to Harry and pulled him into a loving hug. After a few seconds, she leaned back and kissed him tenderly on the lips before saying, "Thank you."

Harry knew what she was referring to, so he smiled back and said, "You're welcome. Now, why don't we go and find your parents and face the music?"

She gulped nervously but when she noticed that Harry wasn't bothered, she calmed down some and they left for the library in search of her parents.

## Chapter 27: Plans and answers.

While Harry and Hermione were just sitting down to discuss the evening's events and their marriage; Voldemort was arranging a different type of meeting.

He was sitting in an abandoned home, on the outskirts of Godric's Hollow. The house was a modest home that had seen better days. There was a layer of dust covering everything. The remaining furniture was covered in sheets that had long since faded from their original white, leaving everything with a grayish, yellowing tint.

Focusing on his connection to his servants, Voldemort summoned Lucius Malfoy and Severus Snape to his presence. He wanted an update from Malfoy and a private word with his wayward spy, Severus.

Fifteen minutes later, there was a faint popping noise from the back yard. A few seconds later, a very regal looking Lucius Malfoy entered the room and Voldemort gestured for him to take a seat. He knew that Lucius would arrive first due to Severus being under the watchful eye of Dumbledore.

Lucius looked around at the interior of the house and mentally scoffed. He felt it was below his station, and his lords, to be here. Pulling out his wand, he removed the furniture cover and cleaned his chair with a quick flick of his wrist. Satisfied that the chair was now clean, he sat down and said, "Greetings, sir. How can I serve you?"

Voldemort focused his unflinching gaze on one of his most trusted servants, looking for any sense of betrayal. Sensing none, he said in his low, hissing voice, "Lucius, were you able to set up a meeting with Fudge for tomorrow?"

"I did, Milord. Is there something specific that you would like me to discuss?" he asked curiously.

Leaning slightly forward in his chair, Voldemort replied, "There is. I want you to put forth the suggestion that you have heard that Dumbledore is quietly making a power play at the Ministry with the

goal of taking the job of Minister as his goal. Fudge is gullible enough that he will buy that and begin taking steps to make Dumbledore look like an incompetent.”

Lucius nodded his head in understanding as he thought over his Master’s plan. Finding no obvious flaws, he asked in his aristocratic drawl, “Is there anything you want done about Sirius Black? I have a few ideas that will make it almost impossible for him ever be declared innocent.”

He paused to wait for Voldemort’s nod of acknowledgement of understanding before continuing to speak, “I think that we should leak the details of Black’s escape to the press. Severus’ was smart enough to visit the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and fill out a report stating that Black had Confunded Potter, Lupin, the Mudblood Granger, and the Blood Traitor Weasley boy. That calls into question any testimony that they could give about Pettigrew being alive and without a body there is no way that they could free him.”

Voldemort nodded in agreement before speaking, “Excellent, make sure you keep an eye out while you are there. I left the prophecy in the Hall of Prophecies in order to draw the boy, and hopefully Black, out into the open. Keep your eyes open for any sign of them trying to obtain the prophecy. If you see Black, kill him and summon the Aurors.”

Rising from his seat, Lucius gave his master a bow as he said, “As you command, Milord.” He strode from the small house and Apparated back to his manor to go over the finer details for tomorrow’s meeting.

Severus Snape was having a bad day. The stinking Potter boy had won the Triwizard Tournament and then his Dark Mark flared black when the Dark Lord summoned him. It could only have been from the Dark Lord, the mark had been growing steadily darker all year.

Pulling up his left sleeve, he looked at the now black tattoo that was magically bound upon his arm and frowned. This was his second summons of the evening. To delay longer would certainly mean a

painful reunion. Getting up stiffly from his chair, he stepped over to the Headmaster and whispered into his ear, "I am being summoned again, if I do not go, my position as your spy will be lost, and my life forfeit."

Albus didn't even look over at his spy, he just nodded his head while mumbling softly, "Be careful, Severus." It wasn't lost on him that Severus had been called shortly after Harry Potter had left the Great Hall. Unable to leave the party just yet, he sighed and stepped over to speak with one of his admirers.

As soon as he reached the gates, Snape disappeared with a pop. He immediately took in his surroundings; he was much more vigilant since being attacked by Black, before opening the door in front of him and stepping inside the small house.

Once his eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, he saw a very alive, and healthy, Voldemort sitting in a chair looking directly at him. Quickly going down on one knee, he said reverently, "It is good to see you, Milord. How may I be of assistance?"

Voldemort was watching Severus carefully. The man moved stiffly, as if recovering from injuries. He did not get any sense of emotion though; he knew that his spy was a very accomplished Occlumens. His voice was low, full of the promise of pain, when he finally spoke after a few minutes, "Rise, Severus. I see that you were finally able to get away from Dumbledore, or were you hoping that I would forget to call you?" His gaze never left Severus' face. He was searching for the tiniest flicker of betrayal.

Keeping his Occlumency Shields up, Snape said pleadingly, "Never, Milord. I was biding my time so that Dumbledore knew that I had ignored your first summons. He thinks that he let me return to you so that I may report back to him with the details of your plans."

Snape was studying the Dark Lord's appearance. He looked slightly different than he did thirteen years ago. The damage some of the dark rituals that his master had undergone seemed to be gone. Whatever method that Voldemort had used to return to his body had worked wonderfully.

Cautiously, Severus quietly spoke, “Milord, what happened? How did you manage to return to us?”

His eyes narrowed slightly at the question, there were only a few people that knew what he had done to return to a body. Voldemort was certain that Dumbledore would figure it out quickly once he got the details from Harry Potter.

Throwing his servant a bone, his sibilant voice rang out, “I used a dark ritual to regain my body. Now, I have a task for you that I think you will find most enjoyable. I want you to kill Sirius Black. He will be showing up at the Department of Mysteries to get into the Hall of Prophecy with Harry Potter sometime after school is finished, I’m sure of it. Do not harm the boy unless you have no other choice, the werewolf and anyone else with them is expendable.”

Severus had mixed feelings about this assignment. He knew that it would forever change his relationship with one of his two masters depending upon his success or failure. His desire to see Black dead was great and his voice was laced with appreciation when he spoke, “Thank you, Milord. I will enjoy completing this assignment. May I have some of the other’s assist me?”

“Only use our brethren that are currently employed at the ministry, or an Imperioused employee. We don’t want to arouse too much suspicion about our activities.” The Dark Lord replied in his low, hissing, voice.

Pausing in thought, Voldemort was trying to decide what to do about Dumbledore. Coming to a decision, he said, “Tell Dumbledore that I am seeking the complete prophecy and searching for Harry Potter. I want him focused on multiple things to stretch his forces while we take care of other matters.”

Snape had a small smile playing across his lips in anticipation as he replied, “I will see to it at once, sir. Is there anything else that you require from me?”

Voldemort looked into the face of his spy and said, "Yes, write down a list of all of the members of the Order of the Phoenix that you can remember before you go." When he received the list from his servant, he hissed out, "Do not come to the main summoning until you leave Hogwarts for the summer. If I call you separately, then do your best to seek me out."

He kept his voice controlled, his low silky tone returning, "Of course, master. I await your summons." Receiving a hand gesture of dismissal from the Dark Lord, Snape rose from his seat and silently swept from the house before Apparating back to the gates of Hogwarts.

Slowly, concentrating on the magic in the house, Voldemort stood up and began looking around for anything that could be of use to him. There was some magical residue in one of the rear bedrooms but in the basement, it was almost overwhelming. Deciding to start with the basement first, he carefully headed down there, his magical senses stretched to their maximum.

Stepping fully into the musty basement, Voldemort took stock of his surroundings. There were scorch marks all over the room indicating a duel had taken place. It was the wild magic in the air that surprised him. Something terrible must have happened to release that much of it from one person. Walking the perimeter of the room, he stopped when he came to the spot where the wild magic had been released. Looking closely at the floor, he saw the old blood stain that indicated where the person had probably died. The question was, 'Who was it that died and how?'

After carefully searching the basement, he found nothing else of value so he headed up to the upstairs bedroom where he felt the touch of magic before. The bedroom was a modest size, something suitable for the first-born child, but not opulent. There was a small desk beneath the window that looked like it had seen a lot of use. The double bed was tucked into the corner next to a nightstand and a bookcase that still held quite a few titles, many of them from the late eighteen hundreds.

Perusing the titles of the books, Voldemort noticed that one of them had a piece of parchment sticking out of the pages. He waved his wand over the bookcase to check for spells, finding none; he plucked the book free and opened it to the page with the parchment sticking out. The book was nothing special; he had read it himself during his Hogwarts years.

The parchment piqued his interest. It was a missive between two people that had great affection for each other. Quickly re-reading the note, he picked up small details that he had missed in his initial perusal. Gleefully, he thought, ‘I always wondered and here is the proof I need.’ Pocketing the letter, Voldemort began to search the room in earnest for any other small tidbit that could help his cause.

He would ward the house with everything short of the Fidelius Charm before he retired for the evening. However, he had an important neighbor to visit before he turned in.

In London, John Granger was still sitting on the love seat in the library, shock plainly visible on his face. Every few minutes he would softly mutter, “Married?”

Annabelle sighed; she was having a hard time accepting that her daughter and Harry were married too. However, she knew that her husband was finding it much more difficult to accept. Fathers and daughters had that special relationship that was often very hard for men to let go as it changed into something new.

She was startled from her reverie when she heard the unmistakable sound of her daughter’s voice.

“Mum, Dad?” Hermione called out to her parents.

Annabelle answered automatically, “Up here, sweetie.”

Harry quirked an eyebrow at Hermione and mouthed, ‘Sweetie?’

Hermione growled at him in a low voice, “Don’t even think about it, buster.”

Chuckling, the two teens entered the room hand in hand. Harry looked over at Mr. and Mrs. Granger sitting on the love seat together and said, "Hello. Are you two okay?" when he noticed the look on Mr. Granger's face.

Harry and Hermione were sitting together in one of the overstuffed chairs in the library while Sirius and Remus occupied the other couch. The coffee table was between them and a light tea service had been set out by the elves.

Deciding that someone had to start, Annabelle spoke first, her voice was soft and reassuring, "We aren't angry, just confused about how you two ended up married. Would you rather talk about that or about what happened tonight first?"

Harry could feel Hermione's apprehension through their bond. Wanting to ease her mind, he calmly said, "Why don't we start with what happened this evening. It is all interconnected but Voldemort is the bigger issue."

He paused to gather his thoughts and to look at everyone in the room before continuing, "As you already know, Voldemort regained a body this evening using some bones, Wormtail's hand, and my blood." Turning to Remus, Harry asked, "Do you know what ritual he used?"

Remus was worried how Harry would react upon learning that he now had his own version of a Horcrux. He kept his voice as calm as possible when he spoke, "There are a couple of dark rituals that he could have used to regain a body. It sounds like he needed your blood to complete the ritual and to forge a deeper connection with you. You mentioned that your connection changed. What did you do to modify the ritual?"

Harry was trying to recall his exact words in the graveyard; his voice was a whisper as he focused on his memories, "The ritual called for 'Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken.' I changed it by giving my blood willingly. When Wormtail dropped my blood into the cauldron, there was a pulling sensation from my scar. I concentrated and snapped the dark tendrils of magic surrounding it. Before I passed out, I felt

something leave my scar and now my connection to Hermione is much clearer."

"Well," Remus said pensively, "that would explain why your connection is different now." He wanted to talk with the other adults before springing the Horcrux upon Harry and Hermione.

Finally, Sirius spoke up, his voice full of curiosity, "Harry, how did you escape? I know that they must have tied you up to get your blood."

Harry looked over at everyone present, with a small smile playing at the corner of his mouth. He turned to Hermione and squeezed her hands while pushing his feelings of love towards her. Softly, he whispered to her, "Don't be afraid, I love you."

Releasing her hands, he stepped into the center of the room and transformed.

Visceral reactions are very hard to suppress. When Harry transformed, Annabelle screamed, John pulled his wife behind him, Remus scrambled to his feet, and Sirius almost toppled from his chair in fright. Hermione was the only one that didn't react. Her trust in Harry was absolute and she just sat there studying his form.

Harry reared up the upper portion of his body while coiling the lower. He was still trying to figure out the different feeling of his Animagus form. Slow he slithered over to Hermione and put the upper half of his body across her knees.

Sirius had regained his wits about him and he mumbled, "Snakes, why did he have to be a snake?" He flopped down into his chair and kept his eyes on his godson in his Animagus form.

Hermione reached out and ran a finger down the center of the snake's head and down its back. About two feet down his back, she reached something that surprised her. What she mistook for markings were actually a pair of wings wrapped tightly to his body. Puzzled, she spoke to the snake, "Harry! Did you know that you have a pair of wings?"

The sight of a three-meter snake whipping its head around in surprise was almost comical had it not been so fast. Sirius had started at the sudden movement while everyone else either flinched or just sat still.

Harry realized what felt different now. He knew he was larger, but the wings were a pleasant surprise. Slowly, he extended his wings and looked at them before folding them back up where they blended almost seamlessly against his scales. He wanted everyone to get a good look at his form so he slithered over to Remus next.

Remus knelt down to gaze into Harry's eyes. The brilliant shade of green really stood out against the black scales, almost mesmerizing in their intensity. The wolf inside of him was howling, it could sense the predator in front of him but he firmly pushed the feeling away. Harry was family and he made the wolf understand that.

Tentatively, Remus asked, "May I touch your scales?"

Harry gave a nod yes, and slowly began slithering up into Remus' lap.

The wolf was raging inside of him as Harry began coiling up in his lap. Its fight or flight response kicking in, however, Remus' will was stronger. He now controlled the wolf inside of him and he was able to squash the impulse.

Turning his gaze to Hermione's parents, he said, "It's safe, you can come over and pet him. Just be mindful of the wings." Looking down at Harry's coiled form, he said, "You're really heavy, Harry." He started laughing when the snake's head reared up to look directly into his eyes, with what could only be interpreted as a glare on its face.

In the different lighting, Remus was able to see other colors amongst the scales. Blue, black, red, green, and a very tiny hint of yellow were all present if you looked close enough in the right light. His natural coloring was just very dark and it hid the hints of the other colors. There was only one multi colored, winged, snake that he could think of but he wanted to confirm it in the library before he expressed his thoughts. Magical forms were very rare and Remus wanted to be absolutely positive before he informed everyone.

Cautiously, Annabelle and John came over to get a closer look at Harry in his Animagus form that was now partially draped across Remus' shoulders.

John had always found snakes fascinating and seeing a magical one up close appealed to his inner child. He moved slowly, not knowing how Harry would react to fast movements, and reached a hand out to touch the scales. Puzzled, he said aloud, "Why is he warm and not cold like most snakes?"

Sirius spoke up from across the room, "I think it must be due to his being a magical form. Normally, you take on the attributes of your form. For example, in my dog form, I get the cold, wet nose that is characteristic of my species."

With a smirk on his lips and a smile on his face, Remus said, "Why don't you come over and get a closer look at Harry, Sirius?"

Sirius' voice broke into a high squeak, as he replied, "No thanks. I'm fine right where I am."

Remus smiled and explained to everyone, "Sirius is afraid of snakes."

In a pleading tone, Sirius yelped, "Remus!"

That was all that Harry needed to hear. Slowly, he lowered himself to the floor and began slithering towards his godfather. If a snake could have laughed, he would have been chuckling as he advanced on the rapidly backpedaling form of Sirius Black.

Sirius was pressed against the back of the couch firmly, looking for any way out of this predicament. He took his eyes off Harry and that was his mistake. In that split second, Harry had slithered up Sirius' legs and settled into his lap.

With a tremendous girly shriek, Sirius tossed Harry onto the other side of the couch and sprinted over to stand behind John and Annabelle.

Harry transformed back and lay on the couch laughing at the look on his godfather's face. Getting his mirth under control, Harry said, "I'm sorry Sirius, I couldn't resist. I didn't think that you were afraid of anything."

Drolly, Sirius said, "Ha, ha. Very funny." Moving from his position of safety, he sat back down on the couch.

Harry had moved back next to Hermione and he was holding her hand again.

Hermione was bursting with questions but she wanted to get the rest of this over with before she started asking Harry things.

Remus had settled back into his seat and was gazing over at the two teens on the couch. In a serious tone, he said, "Do you think we can get back to what happened in that graveyard now?" He waited for everyone to settle back in before asking his next question, "What exactly happened when you arrived?"

Harry knew that they all needed to know so he resigned himself to telling them the actual events from earlier that evening. His voice drifted back into the low, well modulated, tone as he spoke, "When I arrived, Wormtail was carrying a small bundle in his arms that turned out to be Voldemort. He attacked my mind through our connection and while I was trying to fight through the pain, Wormtail disarmed and bound me."

There were gasps from Hermione and her mother while Sirius was mumbling something unintelligible under his breath.

Ignoring their responses, Harry pressed on, "Voldemort and I ended up having a nice little chat while I was tied to a gravestone. He told me a few things that finally answer some of the questions that I have had since I learned that he killed my parents."

Sirius, Remus, and Hermione all looked up sharply at his declaration. His voice was so low it was a whisper, "It seems that we are tied

together by a prophecy that Dumbledore heard years ago. That is the reason that Voldemort tried to kill me."

Frustrated and angry with Dumbledore, Harry snapped out, "He knew three years ago when I asked him why Voldemort targeted me but he wouldn't answer! Is there a way for me to hear this prophecy without going to the headmaster?"

In a helpful tone, Remus supplied, "I think that there is a record kept somewhere in the Ministry of Magic. Perhaps we can ask Dora when she arrives after her shift is over."

Hermione had begun rubbing Harry's forearm to help soothe his anger. It was pouring through their bond and distracting her thoughts. She pushed her calm feelings and love through their connection in the hopes that it would calm him down so he could continue recounting his ordeal.

Harry turned his head and kissed Hermione's brow in thanks. Finally calmed down, he resumed his tale, "I was so angry at Dumbledore that I missed the beginning of the ritual so I don't know the exact words that were used when Wormtail put that bone in the cauldron with Voldemort."

Sirius spoke up helpfully, "That's alright, Harry. Dumbledore gave us enough of a hint to figure out the gist of the words. Please continue."

Mollified, Harry resumed speaking in his even tone, "I began looking for ways to disrupt the ritual when Pettigrew sliced off his own hand into the cauldron. When he came over to get my blood forcibly, that was when I told him that I gave him my blood freely."

Proudly, Hermione said, "That was really good thinking, Harry."

Inwardly, Remus was worried and relieved at the same time. The altering of the ritual had definitely created a Horcrux for Harry and Harry's efforts had helped to remove Voldemort's Horcrux and sever their connection.

Pausing to take a sip of tea, Harry continued, “I passed out just after I got a good look at Voldemort as he stepped out of the cauldron in his new body.”

“When I awoke, Voldemort was busy torturing someone on the ground in front of him, and everyone had forgotten about me. While no one was looking, I transformed and slipped my bonds. Once I was free, I moved behind a large gravestone and hid in the shadows.”

He paused, trying to remember every little detail no matter how small because he knew it could be important, before continuing, “Peter Pettigrew had my wand so I knew that I needed it back in order to escape. When Wormtail realized that I was gone, he raised the alarm, and Voldemort sent everyone to look for me.”

Hermione had tightened her grip upon Harry’s hand unconsciously as he described his ordeal. When she felt Harry squeeze her hand slightly, she slacked her grip a bit and turned her attention back to his story.

Remus took advantage of the pause to ask a question, “Harry, do you remember the name of the grave stone that you were tied to? It could be very important to the ritual.”

Harry closed his eyes and concentrated on visualizing the memory, tentatively, he said, “I think it was Riddle, Sr., but I couldn’t see the first name.”

Hermione practically hopped in her seat upon hearing Harry’s answer, excitedly, she replied, “Harry, don’t you remember, you told me Voldemort’s real name was Tom Marvolo Riddle, that grave was probably a family members!”

Remus paled at Hermione’s explanation while Sirius, Annabelle, and John looked on confused.

Before anyone could do or say anything else, Harry pulled his wand out and repeated the example that Voldemort had given him two years ago. He wrote ‘Tom Marvolo Riddle’ in flaming letters and then

swished his wand to rearrange them into reading ‘I am Lord Voldemort.’

Sirius was stunned; he had seen that name on a plaque in the trophy room at Hogwarts! Eagerly, he barked out, “He won a special services award to the school in the forties! I cleaned that trophy room enough times and I remember almost every name.”

Annabelle had noticed that Remus had gone pale when Harry had mentioned the name on the grave marker. Curiously, she asked, “Remus, what’s wrong?”

Remus inwardly cursed at his slip of control, his voice was calm when he replied, “I think I know which ritual Voldemort used to return to a body. Before you all start questioning me,” he forestalled them, “I want to return to the Black Library to review a few books to confirm my thoughts.”

John joined in the conversation with a very pointed question, “Do many people know that Voldemort’s true name is Tom Marvolo Riddle?”

Remus and Sirius were thinking furiously about anyone that might have known about Voldemort’s true identity. Before either of them could voice an opinion, Harry’s voice cut across the silence, “Dumbledore knows, and I think that Hagrid does too but I’m not sure about him. They went to school together before Riddle got Hagrid expelled for the Chamber of Secrets incident that killed a student fifty two years ago.”

The two best friends looked at each other in a grim fashion. Neither one of them was singing Dumbledore’s praises now.

A bell tolled downstairs and a few minutes later, Winky escorted Nymphadora Tonks into the room. She smiled and waved to everyone and sat on the sofa between Remus and Sirius. Dora noticed that everyone wore a gamut of expressions ranging from shock, to concern, and outright anger. Concerned, she asked, “Did I interrupt anything?”

Annabelle spoke up quickly to reassure her new friend, "No, Dora. We were just discussing some things about tonight's events."

Not surprised at their topic of conversation, Dora added, "Oh good, I just came from the ministry and it turns out they know that Sirius is an Animagus somehow. They added his description to the wanted posters with an artist's rendering. I don't know who tipped them off though."

Resignedly, Sirius spoke up, "Well, there goes my disguise for spying and getting around town."

John looked over at his friend and said, "Why does it matter? We could just change your hair color and use make up to get the desired effects. No magic would be involved so why would you be discovered if the disguise was good enough?"

Remus, Sirius, and Dora were all stumped; none of them had considered non-magical means of concealment to hide Sirius in plain sight.

Sirius smiled up over at John and said happily, "That's great! Do either of you know how to apply that stuff?"

John turned to his wife briefly before looking back at Sirius and said, "Oh, I think that you are in for a treat. Annabelle is quite good with makeup. She used to make the most elaborate costumes for Hermione and herself."

"That's great! It would enable me to get to Gringotts undiscovered so I can straighten some things out." Sirius replied.

Remus turned towards Dora and said, "We were just talking about the true identity of Voldemort. For some reason it isn't common knowledge about his real identity. Do you think that you could help us there?"

Dora was excited and everyone could hear it in her voice, "I would love to. I can add it to his file quietly. Once we can prove that he is back they will reopen his file and find all of the new information."

Annabelle piped up with another question, "Dora, why don't you also create another file on Tom Marvolo Riddle, Voldemort's real name, and tie some crimes to it? That way the law enforcement is looking for him but they won't know it's really Voldemort."

Deciding that he could add to the discussion, Harry spoke up, "I know what disguise Voldemort is using as Tom Riddle."

This statement brought the adult's attention back to Harry. It was Remus that spoke up first, "What do you mean, disguise?"

Screwing up his courage, Harry replied, his voice low, "He doesn't look human anymore. I saw him briefly before I passed out. When I saw him again later, he looked like an older version of the shade that I faced off against in the Chamber of Secrets two years ago."

Dora almost fell off the couch she was so surprised, "Chamber of Secrets?" she blurted out.

Remus patted her on the knee and said comfortingly, "Don't worry, Dora. Harry took care of that problem. We can tell you the tale later. Now, will you please tell us what he really looks like, Harry?"

Hermione had wrapped Harry's arm over her shoulder so she could cuddle up next to him to provide support as he retold the harder parts of his evening. She was very thankful that he had managed to escape using his hidden skills.

The corner of Harry's mouth curled up in a small smile when Hermione tucked herself underneath his arm. Giving her shoulder a reassuring squeeze, he began telling them what Voldemort looked like now, "He is completely hairless with no nose and very thin pale pink lips. His eyes and nose are slits and there is a red rim around the iris of his eyes."

Everyone was digesting this new bit of news and Dora was taking notes on a pad of paper. She stopped writing and asked, "What does he look like when he is wearing a glamour?"

Harry's answer was immediate, both images were burned into his memory forever, "He's tall with shoulder length dark brown hair, blue green eyes, and has a thin build. Visibly, I would guess his age to be in the forties but based upon what Sirius said, I think he is really in his late sixties."

"That sounds about right, most witches and wizards age much slower than non-magical people. Professor Dumbledore is somewhere around one hundred and fifty years old but he looks to be in his eighties." Dora supplied helpfully.

John was curious about the rest of the story regarding Harry's escape, "What happened once you hid?"

Harry was a bit nervous about the next part; he had unknowingly made it nigh impossible to free Sirius with his actions. Turning to look at his godfather, he said in a voice filled with regret, "I'm sorry, Sirius. Peter Pettigrew is dead."

Sirius, Remus, and Dora all slumped back into the couch shocked. They had all hoped to capture the traitor and use him to clear Sirius. Now, those plans were dashed upon the rocks like ships in a storm. Struggling to maintain his demeanor, Sirius croaked out, "How did he die?"

Harry was fighting back tears, he knew what Wormtail's death had denied him, but it was even worse for Sirius. His chance at freedom had taken a severe hit. Harry's voice was just a whisper when he finally spoke after a few seconds, "I bit him, and about sixty seconds later he was dead."

Confused about how Harry biting Wormtail could lead to his death, Dora asked, "How does your biting him lead to his death in a minute?"

Looking for permission, Harry glanced between Sirius and Remus. When the both gave him a nod yes, he reluctantly untangled himself from Hermione and transformed.

Dora's reaction didn't disappoint, she shrieked and almost climbed into Remus' lap. Evidently, she shared Sirius' fear of snakes.

Quickly changing back, Harry rejoined Hermione and put his arm around her again while she snuggled into a comfortable position. Looking over at Dora, he smugly said, "Boo."

Regaining her composure, Dora began blushing furiously when she realized that she was half sitting, half climbing on Remus. To make matters worse, when she looked into Remus' eyes, he gave her that wolfish grin that made her insides melt. She gave a slight, "Eeep." before settling back into her seat.

Glaring at Harry, Dora said playfully, "Blimey, Harry. That was impressive. If you scare me like that again, I'm going to have a nice new pair of snake skin shoes with a matching bag and belt."

Harry was grinning back at Dora. He liked her, she didn't beat around the bush like most adults, and he found it very refreshing. He sobered up pretty quickly when Annabelle asked another question.

"What happened after you bit Peter?"

Closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, Harry said, "Voldemort incinerated Pettigrew's body. In my anger, I sent a silent Blasting Curse at him. Unfortunately, he managed to erect a shield and the blast only sent him flying. He Disapparated in midair and returned to the exact spot that he had been standing but I had already started running as soon as my curse connected with his shield."

He paused and looked over at Hermione's parents before sweeping his gaze over the rest of the enthralled adults. They were hanging on his every word, looking for any clues that could help them later, "The noise from his Apparition made me realize that I could do that too." Seeing the looks of disbelief on everyone's faces, he continued, "I had Apparated when I was in primary school so I knew that I could do it again. I concentrated really hard on someplace safe and I ended up here."

It was Annabelle that spoke up next; her voice was full of relief, "We are all thankful that you were able to escape that madman safely." She glanced down at her watch and realized that it was getting late.

Turning her attention to the elves that had been sitting quietly over by the fire the entire time, she startled everyone else when she said, "Dobby, Winky, would you please show Harry and Hermione to their room?"

John's head snapped up when he heard his wife use the singular room instead of rooms. He acquiesced when she squeezed his hand hard. He knew that they would talk about this later. Belatedly, he realized that it was actually humorous when he saw the looks on the teen's faces.

Harry and Hermione had turned beet red and were both shifting in their seat nervously.

Sirius cottoned on to Annabelle's plan quickly and he added in a light tone, "Come on you two, up to bed. Winky and Dobby have a nice room set up with all of your stuff."

Dora almost snickered when she saw Harry pale at the mention of sharing a room with Hermione. Throwing fuel on the fire, she gleefully said, "Don't worry, Harry. I'm sure that Hermione doesn't hog the bed or steal the covers."

Harry and Hermione practically fled from the library following Winky up to their room. After Dora's comments, they feared further ones from everyone else and their pace quickened.

Hermione could have sworn that she heard laughter erupting from the library before it was abruptly cut off with what she surmised was a Silencing Charm of some type.

When they arrived at their room, she almost walked into Harry. He had stopped cold in the doorway. Nervously, Harry stammered out, "Th-There's only one bed."

She could feel his emotions flowing through the bond and she was sure that hers were in just as much turmoil. With a wicked glint in her eyes, Hermione stepped right up to Harry and nipped his earlobe while purring, “I usually don’t wear much to bed either. I hope you’re not a bed hog, Mr. Potter.” She sashayed into the room exaggerating the swing of her hips as she walked over to the en-suite bathroom to get ready for bed. She was determined to not let the spur of the moment prank by the adults bother her and to take full advantage of the situation.

The truth of the matter was that the best night of sleep that she had had since the second task had been in Harry’s arms that one night that they had both fallen asleep in the Room of Requirement. It was something that she longed for again and they had just unknowingly provided her with something she desperately wanted.

It was a full five minutes later before Harry was coherent enough to step into the room and close the door. He was positive that no matter what, this was going to be a very long night.

When Hermione glided out of the bathroom in her nightdress, he gulped. Stunned by her beauty, he nervously squeaked, “I’ll just get ready for bed then.” as he walked towards the bathroom.

In his state of distraction, he stumbled over his own feet before catching himself and closing the bathroom door behind him. Slowly sliding down the closed door, he shuddered when Hermione’s lilting laughter floated through the door followed by what he dubbed, ‘The Voice.’

Hermione’s seductive, husky, whisper called out through the bathroom door, “I’ll be in bed, waiting.”

Harry was terrorized. His emotions and body were at war with each other. He had just escaped from the person that most people considered the most evil Dark Lord in a century but he was absolutely terrified, and excited, by the thought of Hermione in that nightdress waiting for him in bed.

Screwing up his courage, Harry finished getting ready for bed and stepped out of the bathroom wearing only a pair of boxers and a t-shirt. He noticed that Hermione had dimmed the lights and his side of the bed was already turned down.

He slipped under the covers and removed his t-shirt and glasses. Harry stiffened, in more ways than one, when Hermione pressed her body into his and began making herself comfortable. Instinctively, he wrapped his arm around her and pulled her closer before leaning down and kissing her tenderly on the lips. His voice was full of love as he whispered, "I love you, Mrs. Potter."

Hermione flushed with pleasure at those words and she replied lovingly, "And I you, my husband."

The two teens shared a few more kisses before drifting into a blissful sleep, entwined with each other. For the first time since that night in the Room of Requirement, the nightmares were kept at bay and they enjoyed a peaceful, refreshing, sleep.

## Chapter 28: And so it begins.

Once the silencing spell was in place and the door secure, the adults in the room burst into raucous laughter. The look on Harry and Hermione's faces was priceless. The two teens looked like they had just been given 'The Talk' all over again.

After everyone had calmed down, Sirius spoke up with a hint of mirth in his voice, "You would think that they were going to the dentist office or something?"

Two simultaneous shouts of, "Hey!" by the Grangers sent everyone back into fits of laughter.

Regaining his composure, Remus spoke up in a concerned tone, "There are a few things that we have to discuss before turning in for the night. That ritual was intended to strengthen the connection between Harry and Voldemort. When Harry changed it, he unwittingly created a form of a Horcrux of his own."

Sirius and Dora gasped while John and Annabelle looked on in confusion. Seeing the looks upon their faces, Remus explained, "A Horcrux is a type of vessel that houses a piece of your soul. If you should die, you would be able to come back to life using that fragment."

John was an avid Science Fiction reader and he understood the reference immediately. His voice was full of worry when he spoke, "You say that Harry now has one of these things? Aren't they usually considered evil?"

Annabelle was impressed; she knew that her husband must have deduced that from his Science Fiction habit. Not that she could complain, there were dozens of trashy romance novels scattered on the bookshelves surrounding them.

Remus was surprised at how quickly John had figured that out. When he replied, his voice held a note of the proud educator in it, "Very good. That is indeed the problem. Horcruxes are considered the blackest of magic. If it were discovered that Harry now had one, he

would be labeled a Dark Lord immediately, even though I don't think that Harry gave up a part of his soul."

Sirius piped up, slightly annoyed, his voice was dripping with sarcasm, "That's just great. How are we supposed to break that to Harry? Just tell him, 'Sorry old bean, you've got an anchor in the Dark Lord that will save you from death?" He rubbed his face in frustration before continuing, "He never catches a break does he? I'm worried that if we tell him, he will become reckless."

It was Dora that spoke up, surprising them all, in a reasonable tone, "I don't think so, have you looked at him lately? Hermione keeps him grounded and he isn't your typical teenager. If anything, I would bet that he is going to be extremely careful from now on. We just need to support him and let him know that he can trust us." Looking over at Remus she said, "You need to do that research tonight and tell him in the morning or I will."

Remus nodded in acceptance and said, "I had already planned to do just that, I just wanted to talk with all of you first. There is also something that we are going to need your help with, Dora."

When she motioned for him to continue he said, "There is a prophecy about Harry and Voldemort that is stored in the Ministry. Dumbledore heard the original prophecy but for obvious reasons, Harry is very uncomfortable around that man right now."

Dora was shocked. So many things made sense now. The wild stories about Harry Potter all had a sense of direction to them now. "I'll do it. I know which department they are stored in but it may take a few days to arrange to get in there unnoticed. Who will be going with me and Harry or do you think it should just be the two of us?"

John spoke up from his seat next to his wife, "I think that it should be Sirius and Remus in disguise. Perhaps we should disguise Harry as well. People obviously know what he looks like so my guess is that Voldemort has people already watching the place."

Annabelle leaned over and kissed her husbands cheek, and then playfully said, "And here I thought that I married you for your looks!"

"Shush, you." John replied with a smile.

Sirius was watching his friends on the love seat with a sense of longing, thirteen years in Azkaban had robbed him of his chances at a family. With a sigh, he said, "I agree with John. We all go in disguised. Dora, can you change once we are inside and still be able to get us into the area where the prophecies are stored?"

She thought for a couple of seconds before answering, "Yes, I should be able to. Once we are in the lifts, I can change my appearance and we can all head down from there."

Scrunching up her face, Dora morphed it into the visage of Minerva McGonagall and said in her best imitation brogue, "Now, which one of you is going to tell me why Mr. Potter is an unregistered Animagus?"

John and Annabelle had never seen Dora change her appearance before and they were amazed.

Remus and Sirius started laughing at Dora's new form. It was like being in trouble with their former head of house all over again.

Getting his snickering under control, Sirius said proudly, "We just found out this evening. Harry must have done it sometime earlier this year. We gave him our notes on how to complete the process in September."

Remus added, "I am simply amazed. When motivated, Harry is truly a force to be reckoned with. You can feel the power swirling around him if you listen for it." Seeing the confused looks upon the faces of Sirius and the Grangers he continued, "Dora and I can sense magic to a degree and Harry radiates power. It's like standing next to a raging inferno."

Dora blurted out, "That feeling is from Harry? I thought that was you, Remus."

Chuckling, Remus said, "I wish that I were that powerful." Turning back to the Grangers, he explained, "It's like being in a room that is way too hot and if he gets angry the feeling can be almost suffocating."

Sirius was amazed, he could feel tiny eddies of power but sensing magic was never a skill that he had been able to develop. Puffing his chest out like a proud parent, he said, "That's my boy! We are going to need to teach him how to control that somehow if possible. Dumbledore obviously knows how to dampen the feeling otherwise loads of people would be nervous around him."

Shaking her head, Dora reverted to her normal guise before speaking again, "Hermione's powerful too, somewhere akin to Sirius, but she isn't close to Harry in terms of power."

Annabelle was curious about the power thing that they were talking about so she asked, "What do you mean Harry is more powerful than the rest of you? Aren't you all just using the same spells?"

John was nodding along, but he partially understood that some people were inherently stronger than others were and he figured that the magical prowess varied among the witches and wizards too.

In his professor voice, Remus explained to the Grangers, "It's like physical strength to a degree. Just as some people are stronger than others are; magical power is the same way. The biggest difference is that with magic, size is not an obvious indicator. From what I remember when I taught at Hogwarts, Harry was probably the second shortest person in his class. I'm not sure if that is true now, it looks like he has finally had a bit of a growth spurt. However, he was easily the most powerful when I taught at Hogwarts last year."

Winky piped up from her spot on the end table, "Master Harry is taller now, but most of the students are still bigger than him. He is the most powerful person in Hogwarts though."

"Thank you, Winky." Annabelle said immediately. She had been working hard to make Dobby and Winky feel at home around them.

Her willingness to speak her opinion aloud told her that Winky was comfortable in their presence.

Remus, Sirius, and Dora were all shocked that an elf had actually put forth an opinion. It was nothing short of miraculous; they were normally such insecure creatures.

Something that Harry had said had been tickling her thoughts for the past fifteen minutes. When she finally figured it out, Dora asked, "Did Harry mention getting a warning from the Improper Use of Magic Office this evening?"

The other adults were all thinking hard about whether or not Harry had mentioned anything about that when they were pulled from their thoughts by a childlike laughter.

Winky was giggling slightly as she spoke, "Silly Masters and Mistresses. Master Harry and Mistress Hermione are free of the trace. It broke when they bonded."

Remus gawped at Winky. 'How could we have missed that?' The good news was that they now had free reign to train the two teens without fear of getting them into trouble with the Ministry of Magic.

Turning his attention back to the elf, Remus said calmly, "Winky, we need to tell you something that may be a bit troubling for you."

Winky's demeanor changed slightly as she gazed up at Remus. Her voice held a bit of anger when she spoke, "I know all about Master Barty's betrayal. I found him in the Master Remus' wolf cage."

Inwardly cringing, Remus replied, "Dobby and I were planning to tell you together. Are you okay?"

The small nodded her head yes, her ears swaying slightly with the motion, "Yes, I will be fine. If you will excuse me, I will be retiring for the evening. Please call if you need something. Good night." With a small pop, she was gone.

Annabelle had a concerned look upon her face; she really liked Winky and hoped that this whole ordeal had not upset her too much. Softly, she mumbled, "I hope that she is going to be okay. She stayed here the entire time that the children were here and listened to everything without saying a word."

John patted her hand while he consoled her, "I'm sure that she will be fine. It will just take her some time to get over the shock of it all."

Shifting his focus, John asked Remus, "What kind of snake was Harry?"

"I think that it is some type of Coatl or a mixed breed of some type of snake and a dragon. Harry's wings were more like a dragon than a bird. For all we know, he could be the first of his kind." Remus said as he ran a hand through his graying hair.

Sirius was stumped, he knew that Harry's form was magical too; he just didn't know what species either. Remus' idea had definite merit and it was something that they would have to research. Ruefully, he said, "You are going to need to find out what other things Harry can do when he is in his Animagus form."

Remus smirked over at Sirius and Dora and said mischievously, "Are you sure that you two don't want to help Harry? Think of having him slither all over the place trying different things on you." When they shuddered, he broke out laughing at their expense. "Don't worry, we will handle all of that, besides, I'm sure that Hermione is going to be the ringleader on this project."

Getting up from his seat, Remus looked over at Sirius and Dora and said, "We need to go and have a chat with Barty. Did you get the Veritaserum, Dora?"

Grimly, she answered, "I did. Do you think we should bring him to my boss, Amelia, in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement?"

"Perhaps, but I want to get some information from him about the Death Eaters before we decide." Remus replied.

Sirius stood up and he had the look of a man on a mission, "Right, why don't we head over and talk to Junior, I want to know what happened to the real Mad-Eye."

Annabelle stood up, walked over to Sirius, and hugged him. When she stepped back, she whispered, "Don't do anything rash, Harry needs you now more than ever."

Sirius nodded his head in understanding, waved goodbye to John, and swept from the room to head back to his home.

While Sirius, Remus, and Dora were planning to have their chat with Barty Crouch, Jr., Voldemort was already having a conversation with Bathilda Bagshot.

Hissing at the cowering woman in front of him, Voldemort intoned, "I grow tired of your denials." He jabbed his wand at her while saying, "Imperio."

When the curse had taken hold, he sat down to gather his thoughts. He knew that this woman was friends with Dumbledore and the Potters. Now he wanted to know what she knew about them and all of their dirty little secrets.

Deciding upon a plan, his low sibilant voice cut through the silence, "Now, you will tell me everything that you know about Albus Dumbledore and a boy named Gellert, their relationship, and who died in their basement."

It was a very interesting two hours for Voldemort. He learned more about Dumbledore than he ever thought possible. Chuckling to himself, he thought ruefully, 'The Greater Good. That explains many of his actions; he sacrifices people to achieve his goals. We really aren't that different and perhaps I can use this to my advantage.'

Turning his attention back to Bathilda, he hissed, "You will contact Rita Skeeter and give her all of the details about Albus Dumbledore that you just gave to me. I will seek you out when I have need of you again; otherwise, go about your life normally."

Cloak billowing, Voldemort swept quietly from Bathilda's house and went back to his temporary headquarters to work on a few plans before turning in for the night. By the time that he turned in for the evening, there were enough wards on the property that it would take hours for someone to penetrate them.

By the time that the party ended, Albus Dumbledore was extremely tired. Various people had pestered him for different schemes and he was nursing a headache. Settling into his comfortable wing backed chair, he pulled out an empty tumbler and a decanter full of Rosmerta's Oak Matured Mead. Pouring himself a generous measure, he leaned back and took a deep sip from his glass.

He was going over the events from the evening in his mind, trying to figure out how Voldemort had managed to have someone turn the Cup into a Portkey. His prime suspect was Alastor Moody, or whomever had been Polyjuicing themselves to take on his appearance.

Dumbledore suspected that Moody was an imposter when he heard the rumors about his using the Imperious Curse on the students. Since he couldn't find any concrete proof that Moody was an imposter, he had resigned himself to watching him as closely as possible. The problem was that whoever the imposter was; they were just as paranoid as the real Moody was so they were very hard to watch.

Regardless, Dumbledore knew that the person was a Death Eater and he felt it was better to keep your enemies close to better observe them. His error in judgment had almost cost Harry Potter his life.

Dumbledore felt that the only good news to come out of the entire fiasco was that Harry and Voldemort had deepened their bond. With the Horcrux still residing inside of Harry, their connection would begin to widen. No amount of Occlumency would keep them out of each other's heads now. His biggest worry would be if Voldemort somehow possessed Harry and used him for nefarious deeds.

Deciding on a plan to exploit the connection, Dumbledore figured that he would have Severus teach the boy advanced Occlumency techniques. The lessons would effectively break down the barriers

that Harry had already constructed and allow Voldemort easier access into his mind and vice versa.

Unbeknownst to Dumbledore, the dark ritual that Voldemort had used had been botched. The part of Voldemort's soul that resided inside of Harry had been returned to its rightful owner, severing their connection forever.

At number twelve Grimmauld Place, Barty Crouch, Jr. was struggling against his bonds unsuccessfully. To make matters worse, he knew that he was in a cage of some type and his toe hurt tremendously.

When the door to the room that he was in banged open, he started in surprise. Lifting his head up to see who had entered, he paled when he saw Remus Lupin flanked by a woman he didn't know and a man that must be Sirius Black. Backing away as far as possible from the entrance, he stammered out, "I, I want to speak with Dumbledore!"

The feral grin that crossed Remus' face made the Death Eater cringe in fear. Pleased with the effect that he was having on the prisoner, Remus stepped into the cage and dragged the resisting man out into the room. He roughly threw Barty into a chair where Sirius bound him magically.

Dora stepped up to the criminal and yanked his head back by his hair. When his mouth was open, she quickly poured three drops of Veritaserum down his throat. Once the potion had taken hold, her authoritative voice rang out, "What is your name?"

The glassy eyes and the voice that sounded from Barty Crouch, Jr's throat indicated that he was definitely under the influence of the drug. In a flat tone, he answered, "Barty Crouch, Jr."

It had been decided that Dora would do the questioning with a dictation quill and parchment taking down everything that was said and by whom. Checking to make sure that the quill was working properly, Dora continued the questioning, "Are you a Death Eater?"

"Yes."

"How long have you been impersonating Alastor Moody?" She asked curiously.

Barty was trying to fight the effects of the potion, but he wasn't strong enough, so secrets continued to pour forth from his mouth, "Since August of this year."

Angrily, Dora thought, 'How in the world did Dumbledore not know?' Reigning in some of her anger, she asked, "Where is Alastor Moody?"

Seeing a man smile while under the effects of Veritaserum is alarming at best. The grin that graced Barty's face was extremely disturbing.

Proud of the fact, Barty replied, "Dead."

"What happened to your father, Barty Crouch, Sr.?"

If anything, the disturbing grin got wider on his face as he gleefully replied, "Dead."

Trying to shake off the horrible news, Dora continued the questioning, "Where are the bodies and why did you kill them?"

Happily, Barty supplied, "I killed Moody to deny Albus Dumbledore a capable servant. I burned the body in my office fireplace at Hogwarts after I dismembered it." His visage turned darker when he spoke again, "My father got what he deserved. I killed him and left his body near the Acromantula nest in the forest."

Sirius was silently restraining Remus in the corner. He wanted to attack Crouch, Jr. too, but it was best that they not interfere with the questioning, since they were going to submit the results, and perhaps Barty himself, to Amelia Bones when they were finished.

After briefly checking to make sure that they weren't going to attack the prisoner, Dora turned her attention back to the questioning, "Why did you Polyjuice yourself to look like Moody?"

Still wearing his vapid smile, Barty replied, "My lord required it of me. I was stationed at Hogwarts to learn about Harry Potter and the staff. The Dark Lord ordered me to help Harry Potter win the Triwizard Tournament. I was going to clear his path to the Triwizard Cup that I had turned into a Portkey but I didn't have to."

Feeling as if she was finally getting somewhere, Dora asked eagerly, "Where did that Portkey take Harry Potter this evening and why?"

"I set the Portkey to go to the graveyard in Little Hangleton where the Dark Lord was waiting for him. He was going to be a part of a ritual to return my master to a body."

Remus was holding Sirius in the corner this time. They both knew that Voldemort used Harry to return himself to a body, but hearing it from one of the Dark Lord's insane servants made it much more sinister for some reason.

With one glance behind her, Dora figured that it would be best to end the questioning soon. Turning back to the trussed up Barty, she said, "Is Peter Pettigrew alive and serving the Dark Lord?"

Gazing up at his questioner, Barty rasped out, "Yes, he is."

"Name every Death Eater that you know of."

When Barty was finished naming the Death Eaters, they looked over the list and found a couple of surprises there but for the most part, nothing new.

Drawing her wand, Dora silently stunned Barty and levitated him back into the cage. Once the prisoner was secure, she led Sirius and Remus back up to the kitchen so they could talk about the new information.

Once they were all seated, she said, "Well, do you think that I should go fetch Amelia and have her meet us somewhere so we can turn Barty over?"

Remus was thinking about the list of Death Eaters and he said, "Do you think that we should start making the people on this list disappear?"

Dora was shocked, she was an Auror Trainee, and upholding the law did not include becoming a vigilante. Concerned, she said, "Why wouldn't we just arrest them?"

Sirius' bark like laughter filled the room for a moment before he replied, "Are you kidding? Crouch already killed Moody and his father, do you honestly think that we want this type of person running around in the service of Voldemort?"

Conflicted on the matter, Remus added his two knuts worth, "I think we should remove Barty from the equation for a moment. We are at war now. Are we willing to take prisoners or do we permanently remove all supporters from Voldemort?"

Immediately, Dora spoke up, the anger in her voice was easily detectable, "We aren't murderers! We should just lock them up! Killing them just makes us just like them!"

Sirius sighed in exasperation, Dora had not seen the horrors of war, and she was still young enough that she didn't understand that there were some criminals that could never be rehabilitated. Rubbing the back of his neck, he asked, "Do you know what it means to have that mark upon your arm, Dora?"

When she shook her head in the negative, he continued, "It means you are a terrorist and a killer. You don't get that mark without committing some truly heinous acts. If you don't believe me, we can go back down there and ask Barty what he did to get the dark mark."

Remus rejoined the conversation by saying, "This is just the beginning, Dora. People will start disappearing and dying very soon. The more followers that we deny Voldemort now, the better chance we have at winning this time."

Seeing her confused look, Remus explained, "We were not faring well in the last war. They were slowly picking us off and bunches of people were in hiding. The only reason it stopped was because Harry

somewhat survived that killing curse and Voldemort lost his body. After that, Voldemort's followers scattered and people foolishly forgot how bad it really was before."

Sirius piped up, "We can't afford to rely on the Ministry to give them all trials." He waved his hand towards the list of Death Eaters on the table as he continued speaking, "There are too many people on this list that are high up in the Ministry or on the Wizengamot to guarantee an impartial trial."

Finally realizing that they were right, Dora resignedly replied, "Oh, alright. However, I think that we should question them all about what they did before we pass judgment. I won't condone killing them without that caveat first. Otherwise, we are no better than the Death Eaters. Agreed?"

Remus and Sirius nodded in the affirmative as they chorused, "Agreed."

Cheerfully, Dora said, "Great! Now, why don't we do a bit of research on Harry's form so we can give him some ideas for him to look into?"

Groaning, Sirius moaned, "Not more research!"

Laughing, Remus and Dora dragged him up to the library to begin looking into what type of snake or hybrid Harry's Animagus form was.

John and Annabelle had stopped to check on the two sleeping teens before turning in themselves. Carefully, John opened the door so as not to disturb them.

Harry and Hermione looked so peaceful while sleeping. Hermione had snuggled into Harry's chest and had partially draped an arm and a leg over him. Harry's arm was wrapped around her shoulder and his hand was resting on her back hidden amongst Hermione's untamable mane of hair that had come free of its braid.

When Annabelle looked over at her husband, she noticed that he had the stirrings of tears in his eyes just as she did. They were both reassured by the sight in front of them.

Quietly, Annabelle pulled the door closed and led John down to their bedroom. When he arrived, she pulled him into a loving hug and whispered, "I know that it's hard letting go but it looks like we have gained a son, not lost a daughter."

John nodded in acceptance, not trusting his voice. He was sad that his daughter was growing up but at the same time, glad that he had gained a son. A son that he knew would do everything in his power to protect Hermione.

Squeezing his wife a little closer, he kissed the top of her head and whispered, "I love you, Annabelle."

Her response was immediate and from the heart, "And I love you, my husband."

## Chapter 29: Family affairs.

Remus, Sirius, and Dora were sitting down in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place discussing their plans for the near future.

Looking over at his cousin, Sirius calmly said, "Dora, do you think that you can get your parents to come here this evening?"

Sirius and Andromeda had gone through a tearful reunion a few weeks ago once Dora had convinced her mother that he was innocent.

They had been given the secret to the location of the house once they made their Unbreakable Vows that they would not betray Harry, or any of them, or their secrets. However, only Remus actually knew who the secret keeper was for everyone's safety.

Dora looked over at her cousin. He had a look of deep thought etched upon his face. Nodding her head, she said tentatively, "I'll pop over there and see if they are still up."

Grimmauld Place had been removed from the floo network for safety reasons when the house was placed under the Fidelius Charm and the various other enchantments and protections. Once Dora was outside, she Apparated to her parents house.

Sirius turned to Remus and said in a gravely, "I think that we should all make out wills and have multiple copies distributed for safety. My solicitor couldn't find anything about Lily and James' will or if they even had one. By law, everything went to Harry but we both know that Dumbledore has interfered in that process."

This topic of conversation was not a surprise to Remus. He had been thinking along the same lines ever since he learned that Voldemort was back. Agreeing, Remus said, "I do too. Perhaps we should have some stored at each property and with the elves. They can hide things better than we can. Have you thought about signing over Harry's guardianship in the Wizarding World to Andromeda?"

Nodding, Sirius said, "I asked her to get the paperwork in order last week. I'll sign it as soon as she and Ted bring it to me. That will provide one more check on Dumbledore in the Wizarding World but I don't think that it will honestly stop the man from meddling."

Remus nodded in agreement. In a voice full of concern, he asked, "Do you think that we should begin making other preparations too?"

Sirius immediately understood what Remus was asking. They had been going over the issue for weeks now, resignedly, he spoke, "I do. Even with Annabelle disguising me, I don't feel safe accessing my money at Gringotts. We should keep our vaults open; just empty the majority of the contents. Especially if what you have told me about the Ministry's current policies towards non-humans is true."

Bitterly, Remus replied, "I was actually understating it a bit if anything. For years the Ministry has been passing laws that restrict the rights of beings that they consider to be magical creatures, regardless of their intelligence level."

"Hmm." Sirius furrowed his brow as he grappled with this information. "That means that you believe that the goblins will side with whichever faction is in power, the Dementors will probably side with Voldemort if he can convince them, and the werewolves and vampires are in a bit of a grey area."

"Correct. We should open up multiple accounts in numerous non-magical banks too. That would give us easier access to funds if we were on the run. A safety deposit box could hold gold and cash so we would have both available." Remus finished thinking aloud.

Excitedly, Sirius said, "That's a great idea! Now we just need to find a way to exchange galleons for pounds."

Any further discussion was interrupted when Dora returned with her parents in tow.

Sirius got up from his spot at the table and pulled his cousin into a hug and shook hands with Ted. "Thank you for coming on such short

notice." Turning to look at Andromeda, he said, "Do you have the guardianship papers for me to sign?"

Andromeda pulled a piece of parchment from her robes and said, "I do." Concerned, she asked, "Do you think that this is necessary?"

Gesturing for everyone to be seated, Sirius said in a calm voice, "Voldemort has returned." He ignored the gasps and continued speaking, "It is more important than ever that we have everything set up as quickly as possible. We don't want Dumbledore, Voldemort, or that idiot Fudge, to make a move to have Harry legally removed from my guardianship."

Andromeda's heart was pounding; her worst fears were coming true. The last war had taken a huge toll on the Blacks. Pulling out a quill, she quickly signed the form and passed it to her husband for his signature. Looking up at Sirius, she asked him, "Do you think that you should adopt Harry into the Black Family as your son? I know that he is already distantly related to us, but an adoption would definitely remove another of the potential legal sticking points."

Sirius' voice was full of emotion when he spoke, "I had planned on asking Harry if he would like that in the morning." Very quietly, he added, "I've always wanted children and this is probably my best chance."

Andromeda reached across the table, clasped hands with Sirius, and gave him a smile of understanding.

Ted Tonks was a practical man; he knew that assuming guardianship over Harry Potter in the magical world would bring some issues, even if he were adopted into his wife's family first. The question before them now was would it bring the attention of Voldemort too? Concerned, he asked, "Do we need to go into hiding too or just place our home under the Fidelius Charm?"

Remus and Sirius both looked over at Dora for an answer.

Sighing, Dora said, "Mum, Dad. I know that you two can take care of yourselves, but this will make you a target. I would feel better if we

placed your house under the Fidelius Charm on top of a whole bunch of other protections.”

Nodding in understanding, Ted signed the parchment and slid it across the table to Sirius.

Relieved, Sirius signed his name and said, “Thank you. You don’t know how much this means to me. Harry will be protected from any legal issues by having you as his guardians in the Wizarding World.” He passed the form back to them and grasped his cousin’s hand in thanks.

“We have some more bad news to share unfortunately. Mad-Eye Moody is dead. Barty Crouch, Jr. killed him.” Remus said into the pause in conversation.

Dora quickly supplied, “Barty Crouch, Sr. is also dead. He was killed by his own son. Before you start asking questions, we have Barty Jr. in a cage in the basement and we questioned him under Veritaserum.”

Shaking his head in sorrow, Ted’s deep voice rang out, “What are we going to do about Barty, Jr. then?”

Remus, Sirius, and Dora all shared a look before Dora turned her attention back to her parents, “We don’t think that we can turn them over to the Ministry. There are too many Death Eaters in high positions amongst the Wizengamot and in various other positions. We think that we should try them ourselves and go from there.”

Andromeda and Ted shared a quiet conversation with a glance. When she spoke, her voice was full of regret but a hint of strong resolve as well, “Count us in. What are the plans for the ones that we feel don’t warrant death?”

Seeing the looks upon the three people sitting across from him, Ted realized that they hadn’t gotten that far yet in their planning. He suggested, “What about Obliviating them? We could remove all knowledge of the Wizarding World or simply erase their minds.”

Andromeda gave her husband a look of outrage, heatedly, she said, "Why can't we imprison them?"

Remus answered her question, "Because we don't have the facilities, manpower, or time that it would take to incarcerate a bunch of Death Eaters for an extended period of time. Our resources are thin as it is and our manpower even thinner."

"I agree with Ted." Sirius supplied; his voice calm. Looking at everyone present, he continued speaking, "I think that we should vary the level of Obliviation depending upon the crime. I suggest that we use the people we Oblivate as examples for potential Death Eaters. Drop them in Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade with their Dark Mark showing for everyone to see what happens to people that support Voldemort."

Andromeda was gazing intently at the tabletop, lost in her thoughts about her two sisters that she was sure were Death Eaters.

Ted reached over and put his arm around her shoulders, he knew exactly what was bothering his wife. As children, they had been very close, but when she defied her parent's wishes and married him, they disowned her. Quietly, he said to her, "I know, dear. I know. I promise that what ever happens with them, we will make it quick."

Tears flowing down her face, Andromeda nodded in acceptance of her loving husband's words.

Having a very good idea about what was going through his cousin's mind; Sirius asked her, "Would you like me to reinstate you into the family? That would officially bring Dora into the family and through marriage, Ted."

Andromeda's head snapped up at Sirius, the look of longing and sorrow on her face was plain for everyone to see. Very slowly, she nodded, yes.

Grinning back at her, Sirius proudly said, "I, Sirius Black, welcome Andromeda Tonks back into the Black Family as a member in good

standing." There was a slight discharge of magic as his oath took effect.

Everyone was a bit teary eyed as they happily watched the scene unfold in front of them. Remus broke the silence when he warmly said, "Congratulations, Andromeda, Ted, and Dora."

Andromeda pushed back from the table and walked around to the other side where Sirius had also stood up. When he opened his arms, she practically flew into his embrace and hugged him back just as fiercely as he was hugging her.

When they separated, they both were crying openly. Sirius had gained a bit of his wish for family and Andromeda had been welcomed back into hers.

While the Black's were having a tearful family reunion of sorts, Rita Skeeter was practically drooling at the letter clutched in her hands. It was from Bathilda Bagshot with a request for an in depth interview about Albus Dumbledore tomorrow morning. She went to bed that evening with visions of writing a tell all book about the life of Albus Dumbledore, the 'Great Manipulator.'

Something had awoken Hermione from her pleasant slumber and it took her a few seconds to figure it out. Reaching her arm out, she discovered that Harry wasn't in bed. Looking around the moonlit room, she saw his silhouette next to the window.

Silently, she padded over to him, wrapped her arms around his chest, and leaned her head against his shoulder. Softly, she asked, "Are you okay?"

His quiet voice was full of anguish when he answered her, "I'm scared, Hermione. I don't want to lose you, or anyone else for that matter, but I don't think that everyone is going to make it out of this alive." He turned in her embrace to face her, he could see the moon reflected in her beautiful cinnamon colored eyes, and for a moment, he forgot all of his worries as he lost himself in their beauty.

A few seconds later, he regained his wits and resumed speaking, “I’m an even bigger target now that Voldemort is back. I escaped him again and I know what he really looks like. What do you think we should do?”

Hermione squeezed him tighter and nuzzled her lips into the crook of his neck, planting a few delicate kisses and enjoying the feeling of Harry shivering. She pulled back slightly to look up at him, her voice was full of concern too, “I don’t know. I think that we should talk it over in the morning with everyone. It’s late and we don’t have to decide everything right now.”

She grabbed his hand and led him back to their bed where she gently pushed him onto his back and slowly climbed on top of him. Purring, she whispered into his ear, “Now, why don’t we forget about those things for a while before we get some more sleep?” To punctuate her words, she began trailing kisses from his neck down towards his chest.

When she lightly nipped his collarbone, he moaned into her hair and began returning the favor. Ten minutes later the two teens were cuddling together trying to get their hormones back under control.

Smirking into the darkness, Harry was reliving the feeling of the softness of Hermione as she lay atop of him.

Hermione could see the smirk on Harry’s face as she gazed up at him from her spot on his chest. Slowly, she reached her hand up and stroked his cheek, earning her a kiss on her palm. The emotions in her voice were palpable when she spoke, “I love you.” She could feel his grin get wider when he heard her words.

“And I you, my wife.” Harry answered with just as much emotion as she had in her voice.

The young married couple drifted back into the land of dreams, relishing the closeness and warmth from their cuddling.

Voldemort was up at the crack of dawn, he had a few things that he needed to do in order to weaken Dumbledore’s hold on the Wizarding

World. After a light breakfast, he stepped outside of his new headquarters, walked to the edge of the Anti-Apparition Wards, and disappeared with a barely audible pop.

Surveying his surroundings, Voldemort was impressed. The prison looked nothing like Azkaban. The entrance to the prison in Nurmengard was awe-inspiring; the large stone archway reminded him of the Wellington Arch in London.

He almost laughed aloud when he read the inscription above the entrance, ‘For the Greater Good,’ it seemed that the German Wizarding Community had a sense of humor. Gellert Grindelwald was imprisoned in a place that used his own motto against him.

Making sure that his glamour was in place, Voldemort strode up to the entrance of the prison and spoke to the guard in a pleasant voice, “I am here to visit a prisoner.”

The guard gave the well-dressed gentleman in front of him a searching gaze before replying, “Only family is allowed to visit the prisoners.”

Giving the guard a warm smile, Voldemort said, “My name is Nathaniel Bagshot, I am Gellert Grindelwald’s cousin.”

The guard checked his manifest and did indeed find the name Bagshot listed as family. Casually drawing his wand, the guard said, “You are only the third visitor that prisoner has had, other than Albus Dumbledore, in the last forty years. Why haven’t you come to visit before now?”

Noticing that the guard had his wand discreetly pointed at him, Voldemort slowly raised his hands and continued to display a smile that would have done Gilderoy Lockhart proud. Keeping his voice calm, he said, “My aunt, Bathilda, is not doing well and she asked me to visit in her stead.”

The guard was placated by the calm nature and disarming smile on the man in front of him. Lowering his wand, he said, “Sorry about that. We don’t get many visitors here and Grindelwald is our most famous

prisoner. Dumbledore himself pushed for the family only clause to keep down the number of crazies that would probably want to gawp at the prisoner.”

Nodding his head in acceptance, Voldemort said pleasantly, “I completely understand and I agree with the policy. May I proceed to the visitor’s center now?”

The guard stepped aside and gestured to the door, “Of course, the visiting room is at the end of the hall. The guard there will let you in and the prisoner will be escorted down once you check in.”

“Thank you.” Voldemort replied as he swept past the guard and headed towards the visiting room.

The guard at the end of the hall stopped reading his paper when he saw someone coming towards him. Realizing that it was a visitor, he drew his wand and said, “I need you to place your wand in my care until you leave. No wands are permitted in the visiting area.”

When Voldemort had handed over his wand, the guard asked, “Who are you here to see?”

Smiling, he answered, “My cousin, Gellert Grindelwald.”

The guard looked surprised before his expressionless mask returned and he said, “Please wait inside; I will have the prisoner brought down in a few minutes.”

Voldemort seated himself in one of the comfortable chairs facing the prisoner entrance.

Ten minutes later, an elderly man was helped into the room by a healer. Time had not been kind to one of the most feared Dark Lords in the past century.

Rising from his chair, Voldemort helped the healer settle Grindelwald into a seat before returning to his own spot. Glancing up at the healer, he calmly said, “Thank you, I will call for you when we have finished our visit.”

The healer smiled at him and left the room, completely oblivious that he had just left the last Dark Lord with the current one.

Gellert was gazing over at the man sitting across from him. Looking directly into his eyes, he was surprised to find himself unable to enter the man's mind. Intrigued, he asked, "What can I do for you?"

Voldemort had felt the subtle attempt at Legilimancy and he easily rebuffed the probe. Smiling at the man across from him, he said, "I'm here to ask you about your former lover, Albus Dumbledore."

Whatever he was expecting, that question was definitely not it and the shock slipped through his Occlumency Shields and shown upon his face. Centering himself, Gellert regained control and asked, "Who are you?"

Voldemort smiled at the man in front of him before answering, "Oh, You-Know-Who," he emphasized before continuing, "I'm your cousin, Nathaniel Bagshot."

Grindelwald was a very sharp man and he got the hint immediately. He laughed aloud as he said cheerfully, "It is very good to see you, cousin. Now, what would you like to know about Albus?" Inside, he was dancing, he knew that he would never leave this prison; time had ravaged his body far too much. He would take his revenge any way that he could and Lord Voldemort was going to be his avenging angel.

Voldemort and Grindelwald spent the rest of the day in deep discussion about Albus Dumbledore and their once grandiose plans for domination.

When Voldemort was about to leave, he asked one last question, "Do you want me to tell him anything from you the next time I see him?"

Grindelwald's smile was almost predatory, "I do. Please tell him that I told you everything for the 'Greater Good.'"

Nodding his head in understanding, Voldemort turned and swept from the room without a backwards glance. After retrieving his wand, he left the prison and Apparated to his next target, Igor Karkaroff.

Voldemort almost snorted when he arrived. He was standing outside of a ramshackle hut in the forests around Durmstrang. ‘The man is a stupid coward.’ he thought to himself as he walked up to the cabin with his wand drawn.

Not bothering with subtlety, he blew the entire front wall apart, sending the front door flying into the interior of the shack. He could hear moaning coming from inside, someone had been caught by the flying debris. Conjuring a shield, Voldemort stepped into the wrecked cabin.

Lying on the floor, buried under pieces of the wall and the door, was Karkaroff. He was obviously in a lot of pain because he didn’t even notice when Lord Voldemort himself had conjured a chair and sat down facing him.

Voldemort picked up Karkaroff’s wand and inspected it for any damage. Finding none, he pocketed it and returned his attention to the whimpering man on the floor. Using the toe of his dragon hide boot, he kicked Karkaroff’s arm to get his attention.

There was a moment of uncertainty in his face before Karkaroff realized who was in front of him. Hurriedly, he stammered out, “M-my Lord?”

In a low, menacing tone, Voldemort hissed, “You disgust me, Karkaroff. Why did you not return when I called? Did you fear the retribution of your comrades or was it my wrath?”

Karkaroff was too scared to say anything so he stayed silent. He knew that he was a dead man the minute that the Dark Lord returned and that was why he had run as soon as his mark burned black.

Voldemort’s sibilant voice cut through the silence, “Now, why don’t we have a nice little chat about what secrets you told when you turned traitor.” Leveling his wand at Karkaroff, he hissed, “Crucio.”

The screams were like music to his ears. It had been far too long since he had truly tortured someone for information or betrayal.

Contrary to popular belief, he didn't torture people often, just when the act would serve dual purposes. The first reason was to make people fear him. Because he was so feared, many victims would start talking the minute he held them at wand point.

The second reason was that Voldemort did enjoy inflicting pain, especially on people that betrayed him. Betrayal was something that he didn't take lightly. He felt that he had been betrayed by his father as a child and that action set in stone his reactions to being betrayed.

Lifting the curse, Voldemort watched as Karkaroff twitched from the aftereffects. Pain was a wonderful motivator and he was going to give Karkaroff plenty of motivation before they were through.

The next three hours were the longest of his life. Karkaroff had spilled all of his secrets to escape the torture. By the time that death released him from his pain, Karkaroff was a broken man.

Back in London, the residents of the Granger household were just beginning to stir. John and Annabelle were in the kitchen having a cup of tea while Dobby and Winky were making a larger than normal breakfast.

At half past seven, there was a knock on the door. Dobby excused himself and went to lead the guests to the kitchen. A minute later, he was leading Andromeda, Ted, Dora, Sirius, and Remus to the breakfast table. Pulling out a chair for Andromeda, Dobby said happily, "Please be seated. Breakfast will be ready shortly. I will go wake Master Harry and Mistress Hermione."

The adults were all seated around the table having tea and croissants when a bleary-eyed Harry followed a perky Hermione into the room. Harry stopped immediately upon noticing the two new additions to the table. He looked up at his godfather and Remus and received smiles in return.

If Sirius trusted the two newcomers, he would give them a chance before passing judgment. Plopping himself in the seat next to Hermione, Harry calmly said, "Good morning." Turning his piercing gaze upon the new couple, he said, "You look familiar. Are you related to Sirius and Dora?"

Andromeda noticed Harry's wary reaction at seeing them for the first time. Hoping to ease his fears, she said warmly, "Yes, I am Dora's mother, Andromeda, and this is my husband, Ted. Sirius is my cousin and you and I are distantly related as well."

Hermione had clasped hands with Harry underneath the table. She was pleased that he was getting to meet more of his distant relatives.

Harry was surprised. He didn't know if he would ever get to meet any more of his distant relatives, especially ones that didn't follow Voldemort. He looked over at Sirius again and received another warm smile in confirmation. Turning back to his newly discovered relatives, he said happily, "Pleased to meet you. I'm Harry and this is my wife, Hermione."

Andromeda and Ted looked gob smacked. They couldn't tell if he was joking or not. Going by the reactions of the rest of the table, they realized that he wasn't joking and that they were indeed married.

John broke the tension by saying, "Just make sure we don't have any grandchildren anytime soon."

The adults began laughing when Harry and Hermione turned a shade of red that would do any Weasley proud.

Sirius decided to speak up while everyone was still laughing. The nervousness in his voice was palpable when he spoke, "Harry, I have something important to discuss with you." Seeing that he had Harry's undivided attention he continued, "You already know that I am your legal guardian in the Wizarding World, right?"

Harry nodded and slowly said, "Yes." He was confused about the direction the conversation was headed and it shown on his face.

Giving his confused godson a smile, Sirius said hesitantly, “The Dursley’s are no longer your legal non-magical guardians; the Grangers have agreed to fill that role from now on.”

Both teen’s snapped their gazes over to Hermione’s parents and they were relieved to see large smiles on their faces.

Annabelle spoke softly, her words were from the heart, “Harry, we know that we can’t replace your parents but would you be okay with calling us mum and dad since you are our son-in-law now?”

With tears in his eyes, Harry smiled up at the Grangers and said softly, “Thanks...mum. Thank you, dad.”

Hermione had pulled Harry into a hug and was silently crying happy tears. Her fears that her parents wouldn’t accept Harry now that they were married were put to rest. Looking up at her parents, she gave them a thousand watt smile that warmed their hearts.

Clearing his throat, Sirius nervously said, “Harry, I would like to adopt you formally into the Black family as my son if that’s okay with you.” He had never been so nervous in his entire life and his heart was hammering in his chest.

Harry was overcome by the emotion of it all. Turning to look at Hermione, he could feel the happiness and love radiating through their bond. She was beaming at him and crying at the same time. He reached a hand up and lightly brushed away a few of the tears on her cheeks. His voice was just above a whisper as he asked, “These are more of those good tears aren’t they?”

Unable to stop crying, or speak, Hermione just nodded yes and hugged Harry.

Looking over the top of Hermione’s head at Sirius, Harry smiled at his soon to be father and said, “That would be wonderful.” Tears had started to flow unbidden down Harry’s cheeks after he answered the question.

The rest of the adults were all misty eyed and a touch shocked. They hadn't seen how deep the bond went between Harry and Hermione until that moment and it warmed their hearts to see how deeply in love the two teens were.

Sirius stood up from his spot at the table and approached Harry. When Harry was standing in front of him, they embraced. After a few moments, he pulled back and held Harry at arms length, and said, "You have made me a very happy man today, Harry."

Harry smiled back at his soon to be father and said, "Me too, dad, me too."

Formally, Sirius said, "I, Sirius Black, adopt Harry James Potter into the Black family as my son and heir." Looking over at Harry, he nodded once with a smile on his face.

Understanding washed over him and he knew what he had to do to complete the ritual. Happily, he said, "I, Harry James Potter, accept Sirius Black as my father."

The discharge of magic flared briefly and the ritual was complete. Sirius pulled Harry into another embrace and whispered into his son's ear, "I know I can't replace your parents either, but you shall never want for anything ever again. You have made me the happiest person alive right now, I always wanted a son, and I'm proud that it's you. I love you, Harry."

Harry was too choked up to speak, so he just hugged his father harder and wept. As he relished the loving embrace, he finally understood what Hermione meant when she said that there were happy tears.

## Chapter 30: End of an Era.

Albus Dumbledore, the reputed Greatest Headmaster Hogwarts had ever seen, was confused. It was a feeling that he didn't like at all. Two students were missing from the castle and he had been unsuccessful in trying to locate them. Wherever they were, they were under some very heavy wards.

When Professor McGonagall had removed the Monitoring Charm from Harry, he had discreetly put a Tracking Charm on Ms. Granger instead since they were so inseparable. He figured that they must be with Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, and perhaps Hermione's parents. Based upon the events of last night, he didn't feel like he could do much to impress upon them their guilt for leaving the school without permission.

Realizing that there was nothing that he could do now, Dumbledore sighed again and stepped over to the golden perch in the corner of the room where Fawkes was watching him intently. He was rubbing the bird's neck absentmindedly while he thought about which part of his plans needed to be set in motion.

Coming to a decision, he walked over to his writing table, pulled out a quill and parchment, and began penning letters to a few people that he would need in the upcoming months.

Ron Weasley was sitting in the common room of Gryffindor Tower waiting for his sister and Neville Longbottom to go down to breakfast. He was mulling over how unhappy he had been without Harry and Hermione's friendship. Since Neville and Ginny were both friends with them, he hoped to apologize to them first before talking with Harry and Hermione.

About ten minutes later, Ginny came down the steps and saw Ron sitting on the couch by the fire, which was a highly unusual occurrence early in the morning. Plopping down on the couch across from her brother, Ginny asked, "What's wrong?"

Ron looked over at his sister, apprehensive, and a bit nervous about how she would respond to his apology. Blushing slightly and looking

down at the hearthrug, he said in a shaky voice, "Ginny, I would like to apologize for the way that I've been acting this year."

Neville had been coming down the steps from the boy's tower and he saw, and heard, Ron's apology to the rug on the floor. Shaking his head in disappointment, he walked over and sat down next to his girlfriend and gave her a quick peck on the cheek while saying, "Morning, Gin."

Ron felt like an intruder and his sister being kissed by a boy made him squirm uncomfortably in his seat.

Ginny smiled up at Neville and returned his gesture by kissing his cheek and saying, "Morning, luv. Ron was apologizing to the rug over there instead of to Harry and Hermione." as she pointed at the hearthrug.

Neville looked over at Ron, who was still studying the rug, his voice held a bit of heat as he said, "It's not us, or that blasted rug, that you need to apologize to. It's Harry and Hermione." Standing up, Neville helped Ginny up from her seat and without another word, the two teens left the common room together.

In a historical moment at Hogwarts, Ron Weasley would voluntarily miss a meal while he was deep in thought over his damaged relationship with Harry and Hermione.

Fred and George Weasley had been planning their annual end of the year prank for the past two weeks and they were prepared to set it off during breakfast.

At the Granger's house, Harry and Hermione were getting ready for Dobby to take them back to Hogwarts for their final day of classes to the amusement of the adults.

"Hermione!" Harry shouted up the stairs, "Hurry up, we have to get going!"

Everyone was gathered in the foyer to see the teens off to school when Hermione had dashed upstairs to grab something.

Curious, John asked, “Does she do this often?”

Turning to face his father-in-law, Harry smiled as he said, “Oh, about once a day she will run off to do, or get, something without an explanation.”

“Her mother is the same way. Drives me absolutely barmy.” John deadpanned.

“John!” Annabelle hissed as she slapped his arm in mock annoyance. She turned to face Harry and said, “It’s usually something that I know my forgetful husband is going to need.”

John was mock glaring at his wife, Remus, Sirius, and Dora were chuckling, and Andromeda was giving Ted a knowing look that conveyed that she had to do the same thing regularly.

Blushing, Harry decided to play it safe and said, “Right, then.”

Hermione came bounding down the steps with Harry’s book bag in her hand. When she handed it to him the adults all started laughing aloud. Confused, she turned to a red-faced Harry and asked, “Why is everyone laughing.”

Accepting the bag, Harry said, “Thank you. I forgot that Dobby brought all of our stuff here.”

His admission only sent the adults into a larger fit of laughter and deepened his blush.

Composing himself, Sirius stepped forward and put his hand on Harry’s shoulder before speaking in a warm voice, “Harry, enjoy your last day of school and prank someone. When you two get home, we have some more to tell you about last night’s events.”

Harry nodded and waved goodbye to everyone before taking Hermione’s hand.

Dobby stepped over to the couple and held out his hands to them. When they were all clasping hands, he disappeared from the Grangers London home with a pop.

They reappeared in the infamous third floor corridor from their first year. Dobby smiled up at his master and mistress and happily said, "When you are ready to return home please call for me."

In stereo the two teens chorused, "Thank you, Dobby." When he had gone, Harry and Hermione headed down to the Great Hall to meet up with Ginny and Neville so they could talk a little before they had to head to class.

As soon as Dobby had returned from dropping Harry and Hermione off at Hogwarts, Sirius asked him, "Dobby, do you know if there is a way to ward a house against other house-elves and magical creatures, especially Phoenixes, to prevent them from getting in?"

The Fidelius Charm had a major flaw in it and they were trying to close all of those gaps. Seeing the tiny elf pop over to Hogwarts and back reminded him of the imperfections of that form of protection.

Dobby looked up at Master Sirius and frowned slightly.

Seconds later, Winky entered the room and walked right up to him and asked, "What do you need, Dobby?"

The little elf pondered the situation; there were ways to safeguard the house magically from intrusion by other elves and magical creatures. It was extremely unheard of for a wizard to ask an elf for help with protections of this nature. "We can put up elf spells to prevent other elves and magical creatures from getting into or finding this house." Dobby said sincerely.

Winky looked up at all of the adults in the room in surprise. Wizards never asked for this type of help but she was quickly realizing that the people in front of her were not your typical wizards and witches. In a formal tone, she said, "I would be honored to help protect the houses in any way that I can."

Annabelle was smiling down at her little friends. She knelt down in front of the two elves and smiled at them before saying, "Thank you very much, the both of you. We would all do anything to protect our families and that includes the two of you as well."

The two elves were blushing heavily as they popped away to begin their spell work around the various houses.

Remus turned to Sirius with a smile on his lined face that took years off his visage, "That was brilliant! What made you think of that?"

Everyone was very interested in Sirius' answer.

A little surprised by the scrutiny, Sirius led everyone back into the kitchen and poured himself a cup of coffee before sitting back down. Taking a sip of his hot beverage, he said in a low voice just above a whisper, "I've had a lot of time over the years to think about that specific charm. There were too many holes in it to rely solely upon that type of protection. Why Dumbledore didn't add additional wards and protections to James and Lily's house in Godric's Hollow, I'll never know. I can tell you now that I won't ever make that type of mistake again; the lesson was too painful to ever forget."

He was lost in the depths of his mug, thinking about 'what if's' and it was a few moments before he spoke again. This time, his voice was a bit stronger but it still held a haunted edge, "Seeing Dobby pop right into Hogwarts and then through the Fidelius Charm reminded me that there are other ways of getting past it that most wizards overlook. Voldemort is not most wizards and it's not a chance I'm willing to take with any of our lives."

Annabelle had reached out and placed one of her hands on Sirius' forearm in a gesture of support and thanks. She was too choked up to speak but she understood his fears all too well. Being non-magical worried her if someone were able to get into the house that meant them harm.

Helpfully, Remus said, "Most of the additional wards that we have erected are designed to prevent that very thing from happening, but I

think that having the elves add their magic to the wards will be a big help.”

John and Annabelle knew exactly what wards were on their house having had that conversation with Remus and Sirius when the first moved in.

Andromeda looked over at her cousin and asked, “What other types of wards have you added?”

Sirius’ smile was almost predatory as he spoke, “We have one based upon intent that will prevent someone from entering if they mean to harm the inhabitants, and there are also the standard Anti-Portkey and Anti-Apparition ones too. We also have made the houses Unplottable. As for the nastier protections, let’s just say that anyone bearing a dark mark will have a very bad time if they manage to find this place.”

Andromeda knew what he meant; they weren’t called the Black Family for nothing. There were some truly horrendous defensive wards around Grimmauld Place and she correctly assumed that Sirius had added those same wards to the Grangers home too.

John was thinking about something that Remus had mentioned about Harry having some type of Monitoring Charm on him that one of his professors had removed earlier in the year. Curiously, he asked, “What about something that disables Monitoring Charms like the one that had been used on Harry?”

All five magical people looked at each other in shock. None of them had thought of that before because houses that were Unplottable would prevent someone from finding their location. The issue was negating the tracking portion of the Monitoring Charm. Having a hidden house didn’t prevent them from being tracked to a location that was outside the protections.

Remus grimaced when he realized that they had overlooked something so simple that could compromise everyone’s safety. Remorsefully, he said, “We hadn’t thought of that. If we were Apparating directly into the confines of the protections, the Tracking

Spell wouldn't report any data. However, if you traveled here any other way, it would."

"Can you set up some type of ward that can disable Monitoring and Tracking Spells upon a person's arrival?" Annabelle asked in concern.

Rubbing his chin in thought, Remus replied, "I think so, it will be difficult but it should be doable. In the interim, we are going to have to check everyone each and every time they arrive and if we have the time, before they come here."

Turning to Sirius, Remus added, "We will also have to teach Harry and Hermione how to cast detection spells."

"We better let the elves know about this too." Annabelle added.

Changing the subject, Sirius turned to Annabelle and asked, "Could you perhaps help me with a disguise this morning? I need to get to Gringotts to empty out the majority of my vault."

Annabelle had been giving the disguises some thought and she knew what she wanted to do to make him appear different. Smiling over at Sirius, she said, "I would be happy to. I'll be back in just a moment with some of the necessary things to get started."

John watched his wife leave the kitchen and he snickered at Sirius' expense, "You're in for it now. She went to get her full kit."

Sirius blanched at John's remarks. He knew that he was in for a long session but it was worth it if it allowed him freedom of movement in the Wizarding World.

Annabelle returned with her makeup kit and a couple of towels. Setting the kit on the table in front of Sirius, she wrapped one of the towels around his neck and pulled out a pair of clippers.

When Sirius saw the sheers, he began to panic. His voice cracked as he spoke hastily, "Uh, Annabelle? I don't think that I need a haircut."

John, Ted, and Remus were sitting across the table from Sirius, smirking at his discomfort, as they watched him fidget in his chair. Remus jokingly said, “Perhaps with a haircut you won’t be such a shaggy dog.”

The glare that Sirius sent their way sent the men into fits of laughter. Their laughter only increased when Sirius’ eyes went wide when a lock of his hair fell onto his nose.

Thirty minutes later, a very different looking Sirius Black was scowling at the rest of the people seated at the table. His hair had been cut in a style that would not be out of place in a corporate boardroom. The sides were now short and they tapered up to meet the longer hair that was now swept to the side in an elegant part.

Annabelle held a mirror in front of Sirius’ face for him to see the results of her work.

Sirius was shocked; he looked so different with short hair that he didn’t think anyone would recognize him from his wanted posters. Slowly a smile spread across his face. He turned to Annabelle and said, “Thanks. It looks great.”

Wringing her hands with a sheepish look on her face, Annabelle said, “Thank you. I think that we should dye your hair a different color and perhaps get you some colored contacts in addition to the makeup.”

Sirius mulled her suggestion over for a second before he answered, “If you think it will help, let’s do it.”

One hour later a very different looking Sirius Black was sitting at the breakfast table in the Granger’s kitchen. His hair had been dyed from a light black to a sandy shade of brown. Overall, he was completely unrecognizable from the wanted posters.

Remus was looking over at Sirius in awe. Smiling, he said, “If I hadn’t seen it for my own eyes, I wouldn’t know who you are. You’ll be able to walk down Diagon Alley in the middle of the day and no one would recognize you. Especially if we get you some colored contacts.”

Nodding in agreement, John said enthusiastically, “You look completely different, Sirius. Annabelle did a great job.”

“Of course she did, look at what she had to work with!” Sirius boasted with a huge smirk on his face. Turning to face Annabelle, he said, “Thank you. You did a wonderful job.”

Standing up from the table, Remus said, “Why don’t we head over to Gringotts and get that out of the way?”

Andromeda and Ted stood up as well. Looking around at everyone, Andromeda said, “We should go too. I want to get this paperwork filed this morning. The quicker we take care of this, the better. We’ll return this evening so we can all make sure that Harry understands and is comfortable with our guardianship of him.”

Stepping over to Sirius, Andromeda’s voice held a pleading note to it when she spoke, “Be careful, Sirius.”

“I will.” he answered her honestly.

Dora stood up from her seat as well and said, “I have to get to work too. My shift starts soon. I’ll start setting up that criminal file on Tom Riddle and adding some notes to Voldemort’s original one. I may have to work a bit late, but I’ll come by as soon as I’m finished.”

Eagerly, Annabelle said, “Why don’t we head over to Trafalgar Square and the shops there so we can get a few more things for Sirius’ disguise?” Receiving nods of agreement from Sirius, John, and Remus, she continued, “Great! I’ll get my keys!”

Visibly cringing, John jokingly said to Sirius and Remus, “You two do realize that we just agreed to go shopping with Annabelle, right?”

Confused, Remus looked over at John and asked, “What’s so bad about that, its just shopping.”

Sirius nodded in agreement with Remus and said, “What he said. How bad can it be? We just need a few little things and then we are off.”

Sirius and Remus started worrying when Ted and John started laughing so hard that they were too broken up to clarify why shopping with a women was never a quick ordeal.

Turning to face Sirius, Remus said, "Is there something that we are missing here?"

His statement set John and Ted laughing all over again while Dora and her mother just smirked at them.

When Annabelle returned with her keys and handbag, she was practically bouncing in anticipation. Her eager energy gave both Marauders pause and they shared a look that plainly said, 'Oh, bugger!' as they were dragged out the car by a woman on a mission.

While the adults all went about their business, Harry and Hermione were walking down to the Great Hall. Just as they were about to cross the threshold into the hall, Harry suddenly grabbed Hermione's forearm and stopped her from going any further.

Confused, Hermione asked, "What's going on?"

Slowly, the corners of Harry's mouth twitched in amusement. Laughing lightly, he said, "Do you remember what today is?" Seeing the confused look upon Hermione's face, he continued, "Fred and George left a little something on the door for their annual end of term prank."

Hermione drew her wand and discretely flicked it at the doorframe causing it to emit a golden shine for a second. Admiring her handiwork, she put her wand away and stepped into the room with a confused Harry in her wake.

Catching up to her, Harry asked quietly, "What did you just do?"

The smirk that graced Hermione's face actually caused him to stop in his tracks it was so predatory. A few seconds later, he caught back up to her at the Gryffindor table only to see her still grinning as she

flicked her wand at the end of the bench where Fred and George usually sat.

"Are you going to tell me what you just did back there?" he hissed quietly.

In a singsong voice, Hermione said, "Nope, nope, nope."

With a playful huff, Harry said, "Fine, be that way." and turned to face a grinning Ginny and Neville. "Hello, Ginny, Neville. How are you two this morning?"

Neville was still smiling at Harry's antics when he replied, "We're good. We did have a bit of an interesting conversation with Ron this morning."

Intrigued, Harry and Hermione both turned their gazes to Ginny.

Ginny was blushing under their combined scrutiny. Tentatively, she said, "Ron tried to apologize to us about his behavior towards you two today."

Harry's only reaction to the news was a curt, "I see."

Hermione pursed her lips in thought, she was trying to decide if Ron's apology was sincere or not. After a few moments, she asked, "Was he looking at you or the floor when he apologized?"

Ginny and Neville were both surprised by Hermione's question. It proved without a doubt that she really knew Ron and his mannerisms well. Finally, Ginny spoke up, her voice was almost a whisper, but the disappointment rang through, "He was looking at the rug by the fireplace when he apologized to me."

All three teens looked up at Harry to see how he was responding to the news. His face was so expressionless that it appeared carved from stone.

Hermione knew that he was practicing Occlumency to maintain control. His anger, as well as hers, towards Ron went beyond a

simple apology. There had been too many things said and unsaid, in addition to the Hospital Wing Incident, during the year for them to go back to the way they were.

Slowly, Hermione leaned into Harry and whispered, “I know what you’re thinking, Harry and I agree.”

Harry’s only response was a single nod of his head. If he had his druthers, he would never speak to Ron again. Knowing that wasn’t an option, he silently vowed to make it anything but easy for Ron if the git said something foolish.

Before anyone else could say anything, they all felt a tingling sensation on their skin, except for Hermione. Judging by their reactions, she realized that Fred and George must have entered the Great Hall.

Fred and George were looking forward to their end of the term masterpiece. The moment that they stepped across the threshold into the Great Hall, they knew that they were in trouble.

Their prank had been set to go off when they entered the hall. That way they wouldn’t miss the fireworks. Unfortunately, someone had altered the prank to include them as well.

Hermione smirked at the looks on Fred and George’s faces. They knew that they had been caught in their own web. What they didn’t know was what would trigger the spell.

Knowing what was coming; Fred and George made their way over to their usual spots at the Gryffindor table. The moment they sat down, there was a loud bang followed by a puff of smoke and everyone in the Great Hall was suddenly wearing lurid magenta colored robes. There were a few moments of silence before everyone started laughing and pointing at each other.

Slowly, it dawned on the people around Hermione that her robes were still black with the Gryffindor trim.

Harry looked down at his magenta colored robes and frowned. He leaned over and playfully whispered into Hermione's ear, "You know, this really isn't my color but I think that it would look marvelous on you."

Hermione was laughing at Harry's reaction when she felt the familiar pull of Harry's magic.

Drawing upon his magical core, Harry concentrated on feeling the magic of the prank and how it was attached to him. He silently marveled at the twin's spell work. Their charm was self-renewing as long as the trigger was still active on the threshold of the Great Hall. Every time that someone walked into the Great Hall, their robes would change color as soon as they sat down at one of the charmed benches.

When he found the connection, he severed it from his robes and reconnected it to all of Hermione's clothes, not just her robes.

Gasping in surprise, Ginny blurted, "Harry, how did you do that?" when she saw him change his robes back to their normal black.

Hermione had been watching Harry when his robes reverted to black. Feeling Harry using that much magic near her had made her tingle all over. Because of that, she failed to notice that all of her clothing was now sporting the neon shade of magenta that the rest of the students were wearing.

In the same annoying singsong voice that Hermione had used earlier, he sung, "Ah, ah, ah. That would be telling."

When Hermione reached out to grab a goblet, she noticed that she was now sporting the brightly colored robes just like everyone else. Surprised, she shrieked, "Harry!"

Ginny, Neville, and quite a few other Gryffindors were still laughing at Hermione's magenta ensemble.

Confusion was written all over her face, as she looked around at everyone laughing extra hard at her. Taking a closer look at her

clothing, she let out an audible, “Eeep!” when she realized that her jumper and skirt were also that horrible color. Turning back to face Harry, she said in a sickly sweet voice, “Harry, what did you do to my clothes?”

Smiling at Hermione, he said innocently, “Nothing, dear. I think that you were the victim of the prank just like everyone else.”

Ginny and Neville were openly laughing at Hermione’s reaction.

Turning his attention to Neville, Harry said, “That really isn’t your color either.” Pooling his magic, he stretched out his magical senses over Neville. Finding the spell’s connections, he transferred them to Ginny’s jumper and skirt. When Harry transferred the spell, Neville’s robes returned to black at the same time Ginny’s turned magenta.

Neville looked down at his robes and smiled, “Cheers!” he said happily. He had never seen, or felt, what Harry had just done before and he was a bit awed.

Hermione was shocked at Harry’s improved control over his magic. It seemed better than it was before the events in the graveyard. She knew that he could manipulate the spells on him and feel enchantments on items but not that he could easily extend that control to effect spells upon other people.

Thoughtfully, she asked him, “Harry, can you check me over for any other spells?”

Harry immediately understood what she meant and he was silently berating himself for not thinking of checking her for spells earlier. Stretching out his senses towards his wife, he let his magic wash over her.

Neville and Ginny were watching, enthralled at the magical demonstration that Harry was putting on while the majority of the other students blathered on completely unaware of what the young mage in their midst was doing.

After a few moments, Harry found something that wasn't related to the prank but it was a very familiar spell. Frowning in anger, he directed his magic to snap the Tracking Charm's connection to Hermione after tracing it back to the Headmaster.

She could feel Harry's anger pouring through their bond even though his face was a mask of serenity. She clasped his hand underneath the table and muttered, "Thanks."

Harry knew that they would discuss what he found later so he did his best to squash his swirling emotions.

Before Neville or Ginny could ask what that was about, there was a loud whooshing sound from above and everyone looked up to see the delivery owls bringing the morning post and the early edition of the Daily Prophet.

Harry almost cringed when he saw the newspaper that the owl had just dropped off with Hermione. He was dreading the article that he knew Rita Skeeter was going to write. He just hoped that Dumbledore hadn't leaked the details of the meeting that took place in his office.

Scanning the headlines quickly, Hermione couldn't find anything bad about what had happened. If anything, the reporting was quite accurate and fair. The she realized that Rita Skeeter hadn't written any of the articles for the morning edition.

She could feel Harry's anxiety flowing through their bond about the paper. To help calm him down, she said reassuringly, "Everything is okay. Rita Skeeter didn't write anything for the morning edition."

Harry let out a breath that he didn't realize that he had been holding when Hermione told him the good news. Changing the subject, he asked, "What's our schedule today?"

"Well, we have to get our summer assignments from all of our professors and then we have the traditional end of the year meeting with Professor McGonagall." Hermione replied happily, her magenta clothing forgotten due to the prospect of receiving her summer assignments.

Just before the teens got up to leave the table, Harry stretched out his magical senses and removed the prank from Hermione's robes, jumper, and skirt. Laughing inside, he left her knickers and bra magenta for her to discover later.

Turning his attention to Ginny, he returned all of her clothing back to normal, especially her unmentionables. That was a conversations that he didn't want to have.

Harry and Hermione were on their way to Ancient Runes to pick up their summer assignment after saying goodbye to Neville and Ginny when Harry stopped and pulled Hermione into an alcove.

Putting up a Silencing and Notice Me Not Charm, he turned to Hermione and said, "I found a Tracking Charm on you and I removed it."

Hermione frowned and nodded at Harry's explanation before asking, "Dumbledore?"

Grimly, he replied, "Yes, before we return to your parent's house I'll check us over once more. I wouldn't put it past him to try that again once he knows that the charm has been disrupted."

Taking her wand out, Hermione dispelled the charms and said, "Come on, we don't want to keep Professor Vector waiting."

As they entered the Arithmancy classroom, Harry was thinking of how proud he was that he had managed to catch up to the rest of the fourth year students. Overall, he was pleased to discover that he really liked the subject and he planned to ask the professor if he could take a test that would allow him to join his own year mates next term.

Both teens walked over and took their seats while they waited for Professor Vector to finish with her current student. Noticing the summer homework posted on the chalkboard, they began copying down the assignment.

Ten minutes later, Professor Vector came over and sat down across from the two students. Smiling over at them, she warmly said, "Good morning. Do either of you have any questions about the summer homework or next term?"

"No ma'am." Hermione replied instantly.

Harry paused; he was a touch nervous about asking to take a test on the last day.

Sensing his discomfort, Professor Vector asked, "Mr. Potter, did you have any questions?"

Looking up at his professor, Harry could tell that she would listen to him. Plucking up his courage, he asked, "Do you think that I could take a test to allow me to join my own classmates next year?"

Hermione was beaming at Harry. She had felt that he had caught up to her level but she didn't want to add to his stress levels by pushing him too hard.

Professor Vector glanced at the smiling witch across from her. She knew that Hermione had been tutoring Mr. Potter all term and the results were easy to see in his work. Smiling back at her, she asked, "What do you think Miss Granger? You have been tutoring Mr. Potter all year."

Hermione could feel Harry's nervousness flowing through their bond so she pushed her feelings of belief in his abilities to help him calm down. Enthusiastically, she said, "I think that Harry could have joined our class a month ago. He has been completing the homework assignments for both classes for a while now."

The professor turned her attention to the slightly pink faced young man in front of her and said, "May I see your completed assignments from the fourth year class, Mr. Potter?"

Rummaging through his back, Harry pulled out his Arithmancy folder and handed it to Professor Vector.

Looking down at the obviously muggle notebook that she had just been handed reminded her that Mr. Potter had been raised outside of the Wizarding World. Calmly, she said, "Give me a few moments to grade this." Taking the notebook, she returned to her desk and pulled out a quill and some red ink.

Hermione reached out, took Harry's hand in her own, and said, "Don't worry, Harry. I know that you did really well. You haven't even asked me for help with the work in weeks."

Some of his old traits about schoolwork were shining through, shyly, he replied, "I know, but do you think she will let me take a test to join your class?"

Unknown to either teen, Professor Vector could easily hear their entire conversation in the quiet classroom. Judging by his homework, and his final exam in the class he was in, she felt that he would do well in Fifth Year Arithmancy next term.

Professor Vector's kind voice interrupted the teen's quiet conversation, "Mr. Potter, I think you will do very well in class with the fifth years next term. Congratulations." She had walked back over to them while she was talking. Handing the notebook back to him, she continued, "I wrote my notes in the front cover if you have any questions. I will inform Professor McGonagall of your new status."

Smiling down at the blushing boy, she said warmly, "I'm very proud of you, Mr. Potter. Have a nice summer vacation you two."

Once they were outside of the classroom, Hermione pulled Harry into a hug and whispered, "I'm so proud of you too. You did a great job this year."

Leaning back from the embrace, Harry smiled at Hermione before giving her a quick kiss, and whispered, "Thanks. I couldn't have done it without your help."

The rest of their morning was spent traipsing all over the castle to speak with their professors to collect their summer assignments.

Harry even did well enough on his Runes exam to be promoted into the fifth year class as well.

Just as they were heading down to the Great Hall for lunch, they were stopped by a lone student from Ravenclaw. Her large blue eyes sparkled with life as she looked up at the two Gryffindors. Her voice had a lilting, almost musical, timbre when she spoke, "Hello, Harry. Hello, Hermione. Do you mind if we talk for a moment before you head down for lunch?"

Harry knew the witch in front of them. She was in his Ancient Runes class but for the life of him, he couldn't remember her name, or recall ever speaking to her. Interested, he said, "Sure, we can chat for a moment."

Once they were inside the empty classroom, she closed the door and turned to them, "My name is Luna Lovegood. Thank you for being willing to talk with me. Most people either mock or ignore me."

Harry scowled at her last comment, he knew what it was like to be ignored and mocked. "I'm sorry that I haven't spoken to you before or after class." He held out his hand to her and said, "I'm Harry Potter. Pleased to meet you."

Hermione and Luna were both shocked but for entirely different reasons. Luna was surprised that he had accepted her so quickly and Hermione was shocked that he had initiated a handshake with a stranger, albeit a cute one, but still a stranger.

Quickly following suit, Hermione held out her hand and said, "I'm Hermione. It's nice to meet you too." She had purposefully left off Granger in her introduction.

Luna picked up the lack of a last name when Hermione introduced herself; it was something for her to ponder later. Deciding to get straight to the point she said, "I heard that you said that Voldemort was back after the completion of the third task. Did that happen while you were missing and everyone was traipsing up to the Headmaster's office?"

Harry and Hermione were surprised by the tiny Ravenclaw's insight into what had happened the other night and the fact that she didn't shy away from saying Voldemort.

Luna noticed the blank mask slip down over Harry's features the moment that she mentioned the events from the third task. 'He must be practicing Occlumency.' She thought to herself idly as she watched the silent interaction between the two teens in front of her.

Carefully, Hermione asked, "How did you know that Harry was missing?"

A ghost of a frown marred her expression for a moment before the calm mask returned, her voice held an undercurrent of sadness as she spoke, "No one notices me; you, Professor Lupin, and an Animagus all walked past me as you left the Headmaster's office and again when you returned."

Harry realized that Luna was also practicing rudimentary Occlumency when her facial expression shifted to the blank mask that he often wore. Impressed with her bravery, and a little dismayed at her situation, he asked in his low melodic tone, "What can we do for you?" He wasn't ready to trust her yet; she knew far too many things for someone that no one talked with regularly.

Luna gazed at the two teens across from her for a few seconds before speaking, "I want to help. I know far too much for my own good and eventually someone will figure that out and do something to make my life more unpleasant than it is already."

Hermione voiced the question that was on Harry's mind when she asked, "Why should we trust you?"

Surprising them, Luna drew her wand and said, "I, Luna Lovegood, swear on my magic that I will not knowingly betray Harry Potter or reveal his secrets."

Gobsmacked, Harry replied, "I, Harry Potter, accept your oath." Looking at the strange girl in front of him, he asked, "Why would you do such a thing? You don't really know me?"

Hermione knew that she wasn't included in that oath and it concerned her greatly.

Luna was watching Hermione, not Harry. Something was going on that she couldn't quite put her finger on. Temporarily ignoring Harry's question, she spoke to Hermione, "You are wondering why I didn't include you in that oath?" When Hermione nodded yes, Luna continued, "I'm not sure what to call you. When you introduced yourself, you didn't use Granger as your last name."

Immediately, Harry caught the gist of what Luna was getting at. He drew his wand and put up a Notice Me Not Charm and a Silencing Spell.

Done with his casting, he let his magical senses expand to their maximum so he could scan the room. Finding nothing out of place, he turned his attention back to the girl in front of him, his voice was low, but full of resolve, when he said, "What I am about to tell you is my greatest secret. If word got out, it could endanger Hermione's life and her parents. Do you understand?"

Luna whispered, "I do." She was still recovering from the feeling of Harry's magic washing through the room. His power reaffirmed her belief that she was doing the right thing.

Harry reached over, took Hermione's petite hand in his, and gave it a tiny squeeze. Looking back at the blonde Ravenclaw, proudly, he said, "Hermione is my wife."

"That was unexpected." Luna said as she stared at them with her doe-like blue eyes. A few seconds later, a smile broke out across her face and she said, "Congratulations!"

Quickly, her demeanor changed to a more business like one and she said seriously, "I, Luna Lovegood, swear on my magic that I will not knowingly betray Hermione Potter or reveal her secrets."

Smiling at the strange witch in front of her in relief, Hermione said, "I, Hermione Potter, accept your oath."

"You still didn't answer my earlier question." Harry stated plainly.

Luna was formulating her response carefully. She had felt the magic that Harry had released and she didn't want that kind of power directed at her if she could help it. Coming to a decision, she explained her reasons, "People ignore me for the most part and it allows me to see and hear plenty of things that most people would like kept quiet. For example, Draco Malfoy was talking to his two thugs about serving the Dark Lord now that he has returned. They passed within five feet of me and none of them so much as looked in my direction."

Coming to an understanding of what Luna was offering, Hermione said, "You're offering to spy for us? How does this benefit you?"

Harry leaned forward a touch, very interested in Luna's answer.

"I get to be involved in stopping Voldemort from gaining too much power and get a modicum of protection from you two if I need it. My father, though I love him dearly, is insane. He never recovered from my mother's death but he does try hard to be a good parent." Luna answered in a lecture like tone as she recounted her relationship with her father.

Looking over at Hermione, Harry's eyes were full of understanding at Luna's situation. Smiling slightly, Hermione said, "We need to figure out a way to contact you without your being discovered. Don't be alarmed if a house-elf shows up with a package for you."

Dropping his mask, Harry smiled over at Luna and said, "Thank you, Luna. Just don't do anything that could get you hurt. Your life is more important. We need to get going, but we will talk with you this summer."

"Thank you, Luna." Hermione said sincerely before continuing, "It really means a lot to us that you are willing to help. Be safe."

Luna smiled at them and then turned and walked from the room without a backwards glance. She needed some time to think about

which people to keep the closest eye on for them so she set off for her favorite spot in the Forbidden Forest to think in peace. For some reason she had always found the presence of Thestrals very comforting and they allowed her the peace to sit and quietly think.

A few minutes after Luna left, Harry said thoughtfully, "Well, that was interesting. What do you think, get her a mirror?"

"That's what I was thinking, yes. We can ask Remus to charm on for us and then send it to her with Hedwig or one of the elves." Hermione said in agreement.

Pulling Hermione towards the Great Hall, Harry said, "Well, enough of that for now, I'm starving aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm a bit hungry. Just let me kip over to the loo first, I'll meet you in the Great Hall." Hermione said as she gave him a peck on the cheek before heading off.

Harry ambled down to the Great Hall and immediately went over to where Neville and Ginny were sitting. He had a wicked grin on his face when he saw that almost everyone's robes had turned neon green, even Fred and George's. Whatever Hermione had done to change the prank was still stumping most of the students.

Taking a seat, he looked over at the twins and motioned them over. They arrived at the same time as a very pink faced Hermione sat down next to Harry.

Curious, they asked in unison, "Why are you blushing so brightly Hermione?"

Her cheeks began to turn a darker shade of pink when they asked their question. Hermione looked over at her husband to see a grin on his face that was so sexy that it made her insides melt.

Mischievously, Harry slipped his arm around her and leaned towards her, his lips lightly brushing her ear as he whispered throatily, "Problem dear?" Pulling back slowly, he pressed a soft kiss into her neck before sitting normally.

Hermione was too flushed to say anything. The combination of Harry's smile, the tone of his voice, and that tiny kiss on her neck just below her ear had her hormones in an uproar.

Seeing her blush, everyone started laughing, even Hermione, when she couldn't answer the question. Fred and George were looking at Harry and Hermione with a little suspicion too.

Too curious to contain himself any longer, Fred asked, "How come you four were able to turn your robes back to normal?"

Harry arched one of his eyebrows in an imitation of Snape as he mimicked the greasy Potions Professor's silky voice, "Surely you dunderheads can figure out why?"

Ginny, Neville, and Hermione were laughing at Harry's imitation of Professor Snape while Fred and George looked on deep in thought.

A few seconds later, the twins blurted, "You pranked us! Oh, ickle little Harry is growing up." as they wiped fake tears from their eyes.

Harry was now laughing along with everyone else at Fred and George's antics. Deciding to throw some fuel on the fire, he quietly said, "Actually, this is the second time that I've pranked you this year." He looked over at Ginny and Neville and said, "Bog rolls."

Comprehension began to dawn on their faces as they thought back to the day when a house-elf had given them a bog roll for their school bag. Shocked, Ginny whispered, "That was you? Oh Merlin, I wondered who pulled that off."

The twins were quickly putting the pieces together once Harry mentioned the bog rolls. Their eyes widened comically as they figured it out. Reverently, George said to Fred, "It's always the quiet ones."

Turning to Harry, Fred asked, "How did you manage that? It even caught Dumbledore, I saw him practically running for his office that day on multiple occasions."

Harry and Hermione burst out laughing at the thought of Dumbledore hitching up his robes and running for the loo. Harry's sides were hurting from laughing so hard at the image in his mind.

Ron Weasley had just entered the Great Hall when he heard the familiar sound of Harry's laughter. Surprisingly, Fred and George were laughing right along with him, Hermione, Neville, and Ginny. A pang of guilt washed through him as he realized that it was his entire fault that he was in this situation. Unable to face apologizing in front of the Great Hall, he sat down on the far end of the Gryffindor table so he wouldn't have to walk past the laughing group.

It was going to be a very lonely final day at Hogwarts for Ron Weasley.

## Chapter 31: Into the Abyss.

The Leaky Cauldron was bustling with patrons when a disguised Sirius Black stepped into the dimly lit establishment. Conversation was noisy and there were clouds of smoke drifting near the rafters.

Stepping up to the bar, Sirius sat down and in a fake posh London accent ordered, "Gilly Water, please."

The Innkeeper, Tom, looked over the well-dressed stranger in front of him and said, "Right away guv'ner. Would you like a spot to eat too?"

Thinking it over, Sirius figured that it would be a good test of his disguise to sit and eat lunch in the Leaky Cauldron. If things got tense, he figured that it would be easier to escape from the pub than any building actually in Diagon Alley. Smiling at Tom, Sirius said, "Please, I'm famished. Do you have Beef Wellington on the menu?"

"We do. I'll place that order for you. It should be ready in about fifteen minutes. Feel free to sit here and eat or if there is a free table you can sit there and your meal will be delivered to you." Tom said before limping off towards the kitchen to let the elves know what to start preparing.

While he was waiting for his lunch to arrive, Sirius was pretending to read the Daily Prophet but he was really reflecting upon the morning's events. He felt much better knowing that Andromeda and Ted were filing the guardianship paperwork for Harry and Hermione.

It had only taken a few moments to convince Annabelle that it was in the children's best interests to get them both a registered Wizarding Guardian. After she agreed, Remus had run off to talk with Andromeda and Ted and to fetch the necessary paperwork.

After his run in with the Wizarding Legal System, Sirius wouldn't put it past the Ministry, or Death Eaters, to do something completely underhanded to bring Harry under their control. He wanted every possible loophole that anyone could use to get Harry closed. The guardianship, and his adoption into the Black Family, were the two

easiest ones to exploit. Now that they were taken care of, Sirius felt that he could rest easier.

Reflecting on his shopping trip to Harrods a couple of hours ago, Sirius half shuddered, half snickered at the same time. He didn't know how John kept up with Annabelle. She was a shopping dynamo! He had to admit that she had a very good eye for fashion though.

The colored contacts had taken a bit of time to get used to but now he couldn't even tell that he was wearing them. Annabelle had also added a pair of wire rimmed glasses to complete his new look.

Annabelle had sent Winky to procure a dress cloak to match his new pinstriped suit. When they had asked the helpful elf where she had purchased it, Winky blushed and finally admitted that she made it herself.

Upon closer inspection, Sirius realized that the cloak was lined in Dragon Hide for a bit of extra protection and weight. It wouldn't flap open in a breeze and that would allow him to conceal things easier or to have his wand already drawn if he wanted.

He was pulled from his thoughts by the arrival of his lunch. Digging in, he idly reminisced about having drinks with James, Remus, and Peter during the summer holidays in what seemed like another lifetime. He was so lost in his thoughts that before he realized it, he had finished his meal.

Glancing down at his new watch, he discovered that it was getting late and if he didn't hurry, he was going to be late for his rendezvous with Ted at the bank. The plan was to have Ted keep a look out for any known Death Eaters while watching Sirius' back.

Sirius tossed a couple of galleons on the table to cover the cost of the meal and waved to Tom as he headed out of the pub and into Diagon Alley. He nodded to Ted as he entered the bank.

Stepping into Gringotts, Sirius felt another sense of nostalgia wash over him. The Goblin bank really was timeless. Goblins hated change

unless it benefited them in some way. As he stepped over to a free teller, he was reminded of the first time that his father brought him down to the family's vault.

Knowing that he didn't really have any other avenue, Sirius realized that he would be closing a portion of his family's legacy in Gringotts. Looking up at the Goblin teller, he said quietly, "I need to visit my vault." as he handed his key over to the creature.

The Goblin inspected the authenticity of the key for a moment and then scrutinized the human before him. This was the key to a very old family vault that had not been accessed in person in over thirteen years. He didn't want to risk angering such a wealthy client, even one on the run from the law.

Stepping down from his booth, the Goblin's guttural voice was surprisingly high as he growled out, "Follow me."

They hopped into the cart and it shot off into the depths of the mines towards the Black Family Vault. After five minutes of twists and turns, the cart came to a halt outside of a very ornate set of double doors. The Black Family Crest was engraved on the stone doors in sharp relief, simple, yet elegant. The motto, 'Always Pure,' was written underneath the crest in homage to maintaining the purity of the family bloodline.

After the Goblin opened the vault, Sirius held out his hand for his key. Once it was returned to him, he said politely, "I would like a moment alone."

Closing the door behind him, Sirius turned his focus to the contents of his family's vault. Finding what he was looking for in the corner, he dragged the trunk into the center of the room and proceeded to open it.

Finally locating the largest compartment, Sirius began to levitate the galleons into the chamber. Leaving a few hundred gold galleons in the vault, he switched to loading silver sickles into a different compartment.

Twenty minutes later, all that was left in the Black Family Vault was a few hundred galleons and an equal amount of sickles and knuts. Sirius had even taken all of the heirlooms and placed them into the remaining sections of the trunk. Finished with loading the trunk, he pulled out a Moke Skin pouch that was highly enchanted to be much larger on the inside and slipped the trunk into it before returning it to the pocket in his robes.

Careful not to let the Goblin see what he left behind, Sirius slipped out of the vault without opening the door fully. Once he was seated in the cart, the Goblin started for the surface.

Tipping the offensive creature to ensure his silence, Sirius made his way out of the bank and towards the Apparition point in the Alley. He nodded to Ted before he turned on the spot and vanished with a pop.

Once the Goblin was sure that Mr. Black was gone, he quickly left the main lobby of the bank and headed off to send a message to Lucius Malfoy. Mr. Malfoy had come in the day before and quietly let it be known that he would pay handsomely for information on anyone that accessed the Potter or Black Vaults.

Reappearing in the foyer of Grimmauld Place, Sirius called out, “Dobby!” When the small elf appeared, he smiled down at him before pulling out the shrunken trunk and saying, “Dobby, this trunk contains the Black Family Fortune. Would you place everything in it into the underground vault and then return the trunk to me please?”

Taking the shrunken trunk, Dobby said happily, “Of course Master Sirius. Do you need anything else?”

Shaking his head no, he replied, “No thank you. I’m going to head down and have a little chat with our guest before we decide what to do with him.”

Remus and Sirius had created an underground chamber in the basement and then placed it under the Fidelius Charm as an added layer of protection in addition to the other precautions that they had taken. They planned to do the same thing at the Granger’s for the

contents of the Potter Vault as soon as they could get Harry to Diagon Alley.

While Sirius was having a nice chat with Barty Crouch, Jr., Dora was about to have an entirely different talk with her boss, Amelia Bones.

Knocking on the door to Amelia's office, Tonks was slightly nervous about what she was about to do. If things went pear shaped, it could land her unemployed or in Azkaban.

When the muffled, "Enter." came through the door, Dora stepped inside and sealed the door behind her with a few spells.

Seeing the normally cheerful Auror practicing some serious privacy spells, Amelia was intrigued. Outwardly, her face remained its usual stoic mask. She gestured to the chair in front of her desk and once the young woman was seated, she asked, "What can I do for you, Auror Tonks?"

Deciding to take the plunge, Dora pulled out several dossiers that she had been reviewing and adding information to for the past couple of days. Silently, she passed them across the desk to her boss and said, "Please read through these files before we talk. I think that you will find some interesting things in there."

Curious, Amelia picked up the top file and her mask almost slipped, it was a file on Peter Pettigrew. As she began skimming through the file, she realized that there were multiple affidavits sworn under an Unbreakable Vow that Peter Pettigrew was the Potter's Secret Keeper, not Sirius Black. The notes at the end of the file listed Remus Lupin, Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, and Ronald Weasley as witnessing Pettigrew confessing that he was the Secret Keeper.

Grimly, she sifted through the files for the one on Sirius Black. As she began to look through the pages of notes, feelings of remorse and disgust rose within her. Amelia was a practical woman that believed in justice for everyone. The file on Sirius Black showed just how unjust and corrupt the Ministry had become during the first rise of Voldemort.

Closing the file, Amelia paused for a moment to gather her thoughts. Looking at the nervous Auror across from her, she said tonelessly, "These are serious allegations, Auror Tonks." Seeing the young woman begin to squirm in her seat, she continued, "You did a good job documenting everything and making sure that it was all legal. The use of an Unbreakable Vow to obtain eyewitness accounts and interviews was ingenious."

Dora let out the breath that she had been holding as soon as her superior began to speak. Unsure of whether or not Amelia wanted an explanation, she cautiously said, "There are a couple of other files that you should read as well."

Putting her monocle back in, Madam Bones pulled the top file towards her and glanced at the name, Tom Marvolo Riddle. She recognized it from her time at Hogwarts but she couldn't remember ever hearing about him once he graduated.

Opening the dossier, she began to read the charges and suspected criminal activities. Her monocle fell out of her out of her eye socket when she reached the last page of the file and her gaze snapped up to Auror Tonks looking for confirmation.

Silently, Dora slowly drew her wand and wrote 'Tom Marvolo Riddle' in flaming letters in the air. Swishing her wand, the letters reformed to read, 'I am Lord Voldemort.'

Taking a steady deep breath, shock evident in her voice, Amelia rasped, "How many people know that Riddle and..." she paused and shuddered before saying, "V-V-Voldemort are the same person?"

Counting aloud, Dora said, "Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, me, Remus Lupin, Sirius Black, my parents, and Albus Dumbledore that I am aware of." She purposefully said Dumbledore's name last to gauge the reaction of her superior to that bit of news.

Fuming, Amelia growled, "How long has Albus Dumbledore known the secret identity of Riddle and isn't he dead?"

Shrugging, Tonks' voice was full of regret as she said, "My best guess is that he has known since Voldemort began his first rise to power. Unfortunately, Voldemort came back the other night at the end of the third task. Harry Potter's blood was used in a dark ritual to regain a body for Voldemort." She noticed that her boss only flinched slightly at the use of Voldemort this time.

Making a snap decision, Amelia said, "Put out an arrest warrant for Tom Riddle. If Fudge refuses to listen to reason, the least we can do is make sure that we make it difficult for Riddle to move around in the open." Pulling out a form, Amelia filled out the warrant and passed it over to Tonks to distribute.

Looking down at the remaining file, Amelia frowned when she read the name. Looking up at the young Auror, she asked, "Isn't Barty, Jr. dead too?"

Shaking her head in the negative, Dora said, "No ma'am. I know where he is at this very moment. Read the file and I think you will find more than a few surprises in there."

Giving her underling a look that conveyed that they would be talking about the last point soon, Amelia began perusing the file of Barty Crouch, Jr. Her heart clenched when she read that he had murdered his own father and Mad-Eye Moody.

When she reached the transcript of his interrogation under the influence of Veritaserum, her left eye began to twitch and her blood pressure rose as she absorbed the list of Death Eaters running around the Ministry in various important positions.

Not looking up from the page that she was reading, Madam Bones whispered worriedly, "This is not good. Not good at all." Looking up at the woman seated across from her, she solemnly said, "This could bring down the entire government. The problem is that I would be dead before it ever got that far if I brought even a fraction of this out of the shadows."

Giving Tonks a shrewd look, Amelia said, "Why did you bring this information to me? I can use some of it, very discreetly, but if I use too much, things will blow up in our faces."

Dora was formulating her response; they had gone over multiple scenarios in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place before agreeing on how to present the information to Amelia Bones. Tentatively, Dora said, "We came to the same conclusion that you did. I hope that you have enough trustworthy people that can begin to quietly monitor the known Death Eaters. Perhaps we will get lucky and catch one of them committing a crime."

Amelia was thinking of a few people that she knew who were reliable that she could use to begin trailing the known suspects. The problem was that she didn't have enough people and they would have to be extremely careful about how they went about this risky venture.

Rubbing the bridge of her nose, Madam Bones' deep voice rang out, "What are you planning on doing with Barty Jr.? His reappearance could spell trouble for my department and that would be a bad thing at this stage."

Tonks understood what her boss was getting at in regard to Barty Jr. The man was a psychotic killer and if everyone thought him dead, perhaps it was best if that became a reality. Not liking the decision at all, Dora growled out, "We will take care of the problem but please make sure that those files are secure."

Madam Bones nodded in relief; she was able to keep her department safe from the public backlash if Crouch Jr. were discovered alive. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention. I will be in contact after I have arranged a few things. If you discover anything of importance, I would appreciate it if you notified me, we will do the same if we come across something important."

Recognizing her dismissal, Dora got up from her seat and said, "Thank you for your time and willingness to help, Director. I'll let our people know what is going on and if we find anything that would help you out, I'll let you know."

"Before you go," Amelia called out to Dora, "please file a missing person report on Barty Crouch, Sr. and Mad-Eye Moody." Receiving a nod from the young Auror, she continued resignedly, "We may as well get the ball rolling on that investigation even though we know how it turned out. That way everything that we can do has been done."

Canceling the wards and privacy spells, Dora waved goodbye, and left the office to file the arrest warrant for Tom Riddle before heading back to Grimmauld Place to update everyone on how her meeting went.

While Dora was filing the paperwork to get their plans rolling, Arthur Weasley received a missive from Albus Dumbledore.

Curious, Arthur slit open the envelope and began reading the familiar, loopy, script. The parchment almost slipped from his grasp when he read about the return of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

Taking a deep breath to calm his nerves, he finished reading the letter. Dumbledore was reforming the Order of the Phoenix and he wanted him to begin recruiting new members.

The first thing that went through Arthur's mind was, 'How do I keep my family safe?' and the second was, 'Who can I trust enough to recruit?' He wasn't as dense as people thought he was. Arthur just didn't let the majority of things bother him; it was a guise that had served him well over the years. Many people had underestimated him to their eternal chagrin and he was quick to take advantage if the situation warranted it.

Mulling things over while he sipped his tea, Arthur realized that Dumbledore wanted him to recruit from within the ministry as quietly as possible. Realizing that he needed to see to his family first, he called out jovially, "Perkins! I'm going to step out and have lunch with Molly today. She seemed a bit down this morning when I left for work." Seeing the concerned look on his longtime colleague, he quickly said, "I think she is just missing the children. She always goes through this a day or two before they come home from Hogwarts."

Grabbing his cloak, Arthur left his office and headed up to the Apparition Point in the atrium. He turned on the spot and disappeared with a small pop of displaced air.

Molly was just about to sit down to lunch when she heard the front door open. Curious, she called out, "Hello?" As her husband stepped into the kitchen, the look on his face immediately concerned her. Worriedly, she asked, "Arthur? What's wrong?"

Gently, he led his wife of over twenty years into a chair. Once she was seated, he took the chair next to her and clasped her hands in his. Looking into her eyes, his own fears rose to the surface as he quietly spoke, "I have some bad news. V-V-, oh damn it all to hell!" he ejaculated in frustration before continuing, "Voldemort returned the other night. Harry was used in some dark ritual to bring him back to life."

Unable to believe what her husband had just told her, Molly Weasley did the only thing she could, she fainted.

Sirius had finished his little chat with Junior in the basement and he was feeling a bit hungry. He was just about to open up the pantry when Dobby returned with his trunk.

Taking one look at Sirius, Dobby happily said, "Please have a seat and I will make you some lunch."

Shaking his head in bemusement at the tiny elf, Sirius sat back down at the table. A few seconds later, the clanging of pots and pans told him that Dobby had begun cooking.

Remus stepped into the kitchen and his mouth practically started watering. Since moving into the old house, he had been eating regularly and getting more rest and it showed. Plopping down in the seat next to Sirius, Remus asked, "Did everything go okay?"

Sirius nodded yes while answering, "I think so. I'm still waiting for Ted and Andromeda to get back from the Ministry with the guardianship papers for Harry and Hermione."

Understanding his friend's concern, Remus said reassuringly, "I'm sure everything went fine. No one would question the guardianship of a muggle born being transferred to Andromeda and Ted and Harry is family. That means that his guardianship status is just a formality. They can howl all they want but for once we are using that pure blood garbage against them and I love it."

Grinning like an idiot, Sirius' happy voice rang out, "That's right! I love it when Lucius Malfoy gets a law passed that we can use to pull one over on him."

They were still discussing pulling the wool over Lucius' eyes when Dora and her parents arrived looking pleased but ruffled.

When they were all seated, Dobby began putting the food on the table. Once everything was on the table, Dobby asked helpfully, "Is there anything else that you need?" Receiving nothing but no's, Dobby continued, "I will be having lunch with Winky and the Grangers, if you need anything just call." When he was finished speaking, he put a Warming Charm on the extra food and disappeared with a tiny pop.

Ted and Andromeda were looking at Dobby in wonder. They were still not used to the changes in his speech and demeanor yet but they did like the difference when compared to a regular house-elf.

Remus saw the look on their faces and smiled before saying, "It does take a bit to get used to, doesn't it? John and Annabelle have done wonders for the two elves. They even eat their meals at the same table now and have their own rooms in the basement."

Andromeda was shaking her head in amazement at how different Dobby seemed from their old family elf, Kreacher. Thinking of the tiny little terror, she asked, "Sirius, what ever happened to Kreacher?"

A smile graced her cousin's face when she asked her question. The mirth was evident in his voice as he replied, "I freed him the moment Remus and I moved in. We didn't want him around Harry and Hermione because he was insane. He died moments after I gave him clothes; the shock was too great for him."

When the meal was finished, Dora cleared her throat to get everyone's attention. She had been unnaturally quiet while eating and it didn't go unnoticed by the others. Her voice was devoid of warmth when she finally spoke, "I had my meeting with Amelia Bones this morning. Things didn't go quite as we planned."

Concerned, Ted was the first one to speak up in his deep, baritone voice, "What do you mean, Dora?"

Frowning, Dora answered her father's question, "We can't let Junior go free or have the body ever found. Amelia feels that the damage to the department would undermine her ability to assist us with keeping tabs on Death Eaters."

No one spoke for a few minutes as they all came to terms with what Dora had just told them. Breaking the stony silence, Sirius whispered, "I'll do it." He had done similar things under Dumbledore's direction during the first war and if he could spare the rest of them of this burden, he would. His nightmares were already gruesome enough and perhaps removing the stain that was Barty Crouch, Jr. from this plane of existence would help ease some of them.

Before Sirius could get up from the table to complete his task, Dora said, "Is there anything else that we can get from him first?"

Remus answered her immediately, "I don't think so. We've questioned him for hours under Veritaserum already. Unless there is something else you think that we should ask him, I think that we should just get this over with."

Turning to Sirius, Remus said passionately, "I think it's a good thing that we are about to do. That man is a killer and insane. Even if we Obliviated him, he is still a danger to others."

"Anything else?" Sirius asked in a flat tone, his emotions held firmly in check behind his Occlumency Shields. When no one said a word, he quietly rose from his seat and headed over to the cellar door.

To his surprise, everyone followed him down into the basement. Turning to face them, he said sincerely, "You don't have to be here for this."

Softly, Dora said with conviction, "Yes, we do."

Nodding in understanding, Sirius turned his attention to the prisoner.

The moment the door to his cage opened, Barty realized that his time was up. He knew that they were never going to turn him over to Dumbledore or the Ministry. Sitting upright in defiance, he snarled, "You won't win, you know. The Dark Lord is going to kill you all!"

Sirius pulled out his wand out of his robes and said calmly, "Perhaps. But you won't be around to witness it." Pausing to take a deep breath, he gazed intently at the murderer in front of him. Taking careful aim, he let the hate flow through him and snarled, "Avada Kedavra."

Barty's eyes went wide when Sirius Black uttered those two magnificent words. He heard the familiar rushing sound that accompanied the spell before it struck his chest. The lifeless body slumped to the floor of the cage, his eyes gazing up in silent condemnation at his executioner.

With that one spell, their path in the Second Wizarding War was set.

Disgusted, Sirius looked down at the body and mumbled, "I need a drink." before turning on his heel and heading back up to the brightly lit kitchen.

## Chapter 32: Draco's Legacy.

Lucius Malfoy was tucking into a late lunch in his palatial manor home when his remaining house-elf entered the room with a letter on a silver tray. Snatching up the note, he idly wondered whom it could be from as he slit open the envelope.

The predatory smile that split his face as he read the contents of the letter wouldn't have been out of place on a Cheshire Cat. His lunch forgotten, Lucius summoned a quill and some parchment and composed a brief note to his lord before including a copy of the note from the Goblins at Gringotts.

Disdainfully, he called out, "Elf!" When the tiny creature hobbled into the room, he gave it a look of loathing before speaking down to the filthy vermin, "It took you long enough to get here. Make sure to punish yourself harshly when you return from delivering this letter to the Dark Lord."

Trembling, the diminutive elf accepted the letter from her master before popping away to do his bidding.

Looking at the spot that the elf had just vacated, his lip curled in revulsion. House-elves disgusted him to no end but they were extremely useful. Since the debacle with Dobby, he made sure that his remaining elf wasn't seen by anyone but his fellow Death Eaters. Lucius also made sure that there was a standing order never to accept clothes from any family member in any way, shape, or form.

Just thinking about how that insignificant brat, Potter, had freed Dobby made his blood boil. Pushing those thoughts aside, he wiped his mouth on a pressed linen napkin, dropped it on the table, then rose from his chair and headed down to the cellar where he had a makeshift dungeon that was currently occupied by a muggle family.

As he approached the dungeon, he could hear the screams from the filthy muggle woman. Stepping into the room, he walked up to the screaming woman and backhanded her as hard as he could.

Snatching up a handful of her matted hair, he wrenched her head up to look into her eyes. Seeing, and smelling, her fear made his pulse quicken. His aristocratic drawl had an edge of pleasure in it as he whispered harshly, “Shut your mouth you filthy muggle before I give you something to really scream about.”

Turning to face Crabbe and Goyle, he said in a voice that would not be out of place at Sunday dinner, “You two will stake out Gringotts and I will keep watch in Diagon Alley. Sirius Black was spotted there today and we may get lucky and catch him, or Potter, for our master.” Pulling out the note from the Goblin, he handed it over to them and said, “Here is the description of what Black looked like. Look for him because I’m sure that if Potter goes to the bank, he will be disguised as well.”

With one last glance at the muggle woman cowering in the corner, Lucius smirked, and said to her absolute horror, “Of course, please finish up with her. I should be ready to depart in half an hour.” Her cries of pain and despair were like music to his ears as he headed back up to finish his lunch.

Lunch was just winding down in the Great Hall within Hogwarts. Some students were milling about, chatting with their friends, while others began to head off to do who knows what before they left for the summer.

As Harry, Hermione, the twins, Ginny, and Neville were getting up to leave the hall, Draco Malfoy sauntered over in his normal colored robes with a snarl of disgust on his pale face. Inwardly groaning, Harry wondered if he could ever go a day without interacting with the pompous fool.

Malfoy stepped up to the group of Gryffindors and said in his nasal drawl, “You cheated didn’t you, Potter? There is no other explanation for how you managed to win the tournament.”

Ginny was about to retort when a raised hand from Harry stilled her tongue. Fuming at Malfoy’s slight, she settled for glaring at him while tapping her finger on the handle of her wand.

Slowly moving to the side, Harry positioned himself with his back to the Slytherin Table and putting his friends behind Malfoy. As he was moving, he began stretching out his magical senses, alert for an attack. Smirking, Harry looked back at Malfoy and said simply, "You're jealous, Malfoy." Taking a stab in the dark, Harry guessed, "You're mad that you didn't get picked by the Goblet after you paid an older student to put your name in. It must really brass you off that I won the blasted tournament and I didn't even enter myself."

Malfoy's cheeks began turning red in his anger and embarrassment. Snatching his wand out of his robes, he leveled it at Potter and roared, "Confringo!"

The Blasting Hex rocketed from Draco's wand but Harry had already stepped aside, letting the spell pass by harmlessly. The hex connected with the Slytherin Table with disastrous results. Shards of wood were sent flying in every direction as the hex obliterated the table, wounding a dozen students in the process.

Draco looked on in horror as his spell destroyed the Slytherin House Table. When the screams of his injured housemates reached his ears, he forgot all about the furious wizard in front of him.

Harry had begun pooling his magic the moment he felt Malfoy's spell start to leave his wand. As he sidestepped the lethal hex, he brought his own wand to bear and sent a Binding Jinx at the inbred fool. Ropes shot from the tip of Harry's wand, tightly wrapping around Malfoy causing him to fall over backwards.

Students were screaming while the teachers were rushing towards the injured students to treat the wounded as best as they could. The ghosts flew from the Great Hall to fetch Madam Pomfrey as quickly as possible.

Stepping over to Malfoy, Harry kicked aside the idiot's wand, stunned him, and then turned his attention to the chaos over at the Slytherin Table.

Professor Snape was feverishly attending to Daphne Greengrass. She had been the closest to the blast and her body was riddled with

shrapnel from the explosion. Her face was a bloody mess and her right shoulder looked like it had been put through a meat grinder.

As Madam Pomfrey came rushing into the Great Hall, she quickly took stock of the situation. Realizing that Severus would be dealing with the most injured student, she rushed over and began working with him to save the young woman's life.

Silently, Harry watched the scene unfolding in front of him. Malfoy's actions had driven home the point that all wizards and witches were armed and dangerous. He realized that he was going to have to learn how to keep his magical senses attuned at all times, not just when he felt like he was in danger. Shaking his head at the thought of Malfoy actually teaching him something, Harry stepped back over to Hermione and their friends.

Hermione was hugging herself in horror at the spectacle in front of her. She knew Daphne, not well, but they were on semi-friendly terms. When Harry approached her, she threw herself into his arms and whispered in his ear, "Do you think that Daphne will be okay?"

Glancing at the carnage in front of them, Harry's posture slumped and that told her just as much as his reply, "No. I think her arm is really badly damaged and she is definitely going to have a bunch of new scars if she can be healed."

Fred and George had watched the entire confrontation unfold in silence. When Harry had positioned himself with his back to the Slytherin Table, they thought that he was insane. Now, they realized that he did it to protect his friends. Realizing that it could have easily been all of them on the receiving end of that hex made them shudder at the thought.

Silently, George walked over to the entrance to the Great Hall and cancelled the prank from the morning while Fred was undoing the trigger on the benches. They both understood that this was not a time for pranks.

Madam Pomfrey and Severus Snape were working frantically on Miss Greengrass. The young woman had lost a lot of blood and it looked

like she was going to lose her arm from the shoulder down if they were going to save her life. Turning her head to her colleague, she whispered, "Severus, I'm going to have to take her arm. The bleeding is too severe to be healed in time to save her life."

Onyx eyes bore into the healer's hazel ones for a moment before Snape whispered in his silky voice, "Do it. I will cauterize the wound when you're done."

Minerva McGonagall had been watching while her co-workers tried to save Daphne's life. When she heard what was being discussed, she conjured privacy partitions and began herding the students out of the area.

Dumbledore entered the Great Hall in time to see Minerva conjure privacy screens around Madam Pomfrey, Severus Snape, and what he presumed was an injured student. Taking in the destruction around him, his gaze fell upon a trussed up, and stunned, Draco Malfoy.

He noticed Harry Potter hugging his girlfriend, Miss Granger, to him as they stared at the spectacle in front of them. Dumbledore knew that Harry was involved in this somehow. No one in the school was able to aggravate Mr. Malfoy to the extent that Harry could.

Walking over to the stunned form of Draco Malfoy, he peered intently down at the young man. He was so lost in thought that he almost missed Harry Potter stepping up to him. Turning his ancient gaze to the young Gryffindor, he asked, "What happened here, Mr. Potter?"

Harry looked up into the troubled blue eyes of the headmaster and pushed the memory of the encounter to the surface of his thoughts. Shielding the rest of his mind, Harry calmly said, "Take a peak, sir. I will push the memory to you."

Dumbledore was shocked; this was the first time that Harry acknowledged that he knew that he was a Master Legilimens. Carefully, he said, "Thank you, Mr. Potter." He slowly pushed out his mental probe towards the young man's mind. When he made the connection, Harry began feeding him the memory of the event.

After a few seconds, the memory ended, and Dumbledore found himself back in his own mind without realizing that he had been pushed out of Mr. Potters. Deciding to deal with that nugget of information later, he turned his focus to the events that transpired between Mr. Potter and Mr. Malfoy.

With a casual wave of his wand, Dumbledore summoned Draco's wand to him and placed it in his robe pocket. Looking at his Deputy Headmistress, he beckoned her over to them. When she arrived, his voice sounded tired but determined, "Minerva, please contact Amelia Bones and inform her that we have a situation that requires her presence." He paused a moment, then added, "Do not tell her who the culprit is until she is here. It is important that we take care of this before word gets to Lucius."

Minerva nodded once and headed off to make a floo call in the antechamber off the Great Hall.

Harry understood what Dumbledore was aiming for; Lucius Malfoy had Fudge in his back pocket and would do everything in his power to get his son off without facing charges. Quietly, Harry asked the headmaster, "Do you think that Draco deserves that second chance now, sir? That curse would have killed me had it connected. Instead, he very nearly killed a dozen students." Finished making his point, he walked away leaving a frustrated Albus Dumbledore behind pondering where Draco Malfoy had gone so wrong.

When Amelia stepped through the floo into Hogwarts, she knew that something terrible had happened. Looking up at her longtime friend, she asked, "How bad is it, Minerva?"

Minerva McGonagall pursed her lips in frustration and practically hissed, "It's very bad. Draco Malfoy very nearly killed a dozen students from his own house. Daphne Greengrass is the most seriously injured." Seeing Amelia's monocle fall out of her eye in shock, she pushed on, "Miss Greengrass is going to lose her right arm and she will have multiple scars adorning her body and face if she survives."

Madam Bones almost gasped when she heard the details from the Deputy Headmistress. Steeling herself for the worst, she put on a calm mask and said, "Please take me to the scene of the crime."

When they entered the Great Hall, the first thing that the Director of Magical Law Enforcement noticed was the partitions surrounding what she presumed to be Miss Greengrass and the school mediwitch. Spying Dumbledore standing in the middle of the hall next to an unconscious and bound Draco Malfoy, she made her way over to him.

Albus Dumbledore felt every one of his one hundred and fifty two years as he took in the situation. Draco Malfoy was about to be hauled off to the Ministry for his careless assault, Daphne Greengrass would be lucky if she survived, or unlucky depending upon how one looked at things, and Harry Potter had just cast some serious doubts upon one of Albus' oldest beliefs.

Releasing a sigh, Dumbledore turned to Madam Bones and said, "Thank you for coming so quickly." He withdrew Draco's wand from his pocket and presented it to her, "Here is Mr. Malfoy's wand. Mr. Potter witnessed the entire incident from a unique perspective. The curse Mr. Malfoy fired was meant for Mr. Potter but he dodged it and it struck the Slytherin House Table instead."

Amelia looked over at the destruction Draco Malfoy's spell had caused. She knew that the curse would have been fatal had it actually struck Mr. Potter. Not glancing away from the destruction, she said in a clipped tone, "Where is Mr. Potter now?" Adding the additional charge of attempted murder to the list would really help her case against the Malfoy heir. Because The-Boy-Who-Lived was the target, that would go a long way in seeing that Draco Malfoy stood trial.

Albus gestured to their left while saying, "He is with his friends over by the entrance. I have already spoken with him about what happened here. Do you wish to speak with him now or will you take a statement from him later?"

Madam Bones really wanted to speak with Harry Potter now but she knew that the longer she delayed in taking Mr. Malfoy into custody, the more likely it was that she would have to deal with Fudge and Lucius upon her return. Sighing, she said, "No, I will interview him later. I need to get Draco Malfoy to the Ministry and processed as quickly as possible. Your rendition of events is good enough for now."

Somberly, Dumbledore said, "Very well. I will inform Mr. Potter that you will be contacting him at his relative's house soon for an interview."

Amelia didn't let the shock show on her face at Dumbledore's statement. She knew that Mr. Potter no longer resided with his muggle relatives and that he had new guardians. She decided against correcting his assumption, but she would mention it when she was eventually able to speak to Mr. Potter. Too many things didn't add up around the young man and she was curious to see what was really going on, not what the press or Albus Dumbledore reported.

Stepping over to the unconscious Draco Malfoy, Amelia pulled out two pair of enchanted manacles that could only be taken off by an Auror. She slapped them on his wrists and ankles before vanishing the ropes and waking him up with a quick flick of her wrist.

Draco looked around in momentary confusion before the details of what he had done came rushing back to him. He blanched when he realized that he was cuffed and sitting on the ground in front of the head of the Auror Department. He almost shuddered when he saw the cold, calculating, look that she was giving him. Instead, his arrogance won out and he drawled, "When my father..."

"Shut your mouth, you foolish child." Amelia's harsh tone of voice cut across him, "Your father isn't going to be able to save you from your own arrogance. Attempted murder is a very serious charge, not to mention the fact that Miss Greengrass may not survive, and you also injured a score of your own housemates."

Seeing the young man pale at the mention of almost killing Miss Greengrass, Madam Bones continued talking loudly, making sure that everyone could hear what was going on, "You have just caused all

sorts of trouble for your father. Many of his business associates' children were just injured by you."

Draco's skin color was now an ashen green as he started to think through what he had done and what his father was going to do to him when they returned to the manor. It never occurred to him that his father might not be able to get him released. He was so lost in his own thoughts that he didn't realize that the headmaster had joined them.

Albus Dumbledore looked down at the young man trussed up on the floor of the Great Hall and sighed. His voice was laced with regret when he spoke in a clear voice that carried across the entire Great Hall with ease, "Draco Malfoy, you are hereby expelled from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Your wand has been turned over to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement as evidence of your crimes. I shall inform your parents that they may come and pick up your effects."

Too stunned to speak, Draco just sat there on the floor looking like a fish out of water after he was expelled.

Whispered conversations broke out all over the Great Hall as Dumbledore's announcement began to sink in. Some students were openly pointing at the disgraced boy while others continued talking amongst themselves about the events that they had just witnessed. The majority of the school was silently milling about in shock while the professors valiantly worked on their injured classmates.

Amelia reached down and hauled the prisoner to his feet. Turning to face Albus, she quietly asked, "Would you please make a Portkey to my office? I don't want anyone seeing me bring him in."

Only the Headmaster of Hogwarts could make a Portkey that could penetrate the wards of the castle. As everyone discovered at the end of the Third Task, anyone could make a Portkey to penetrate the grounds but that was something that the teachers were trying to rectify.

Dumbledore reached over, grabbed an empty goblet off the table, and tapped it with his wand. It glowed blue for a moment before he handed it to Amelia. Solemnly, he said, "Just tap it with your wand to activate it. It's a one way Portkey." He knew that the reverberations from today's events would echo for months, perhaps years.

Unwittingly, Draco Malfoy had just struck a major blow against Voldemort. Eight of the injured children were from the ranks of the Death Eaters and they were going to want retribution in some fashion.

Amelia touched the Portkey to Draco's hand and then activated it with a tap of her wand.

They vanished in a swirl of light and colors from the Great Hall, cementing Draco's Malfoy's Legacy in the lore of Hogwarts.

## Chapter 33: A Bloody Day.

Harry was holding onto Hermione as he surveyed the damage from Malfoy's curse. As his eyes swept the room, he saw the telltale flash of a Portkey indicating that Amelia Bones departed with the blonde idiot.

He was vaguely aware that Hermione was talking to him. Looking into her worried eyes, he softly said, "I'm sorry. I was looking at the destruction from Malfoy's curse and not paying attention. What did you say?"

Nodding in acceptance, Hermione asked, "Why hasn't Professor Dumbledore called Fawkes down to help? You said that he saved you after you were bitten by the Basilisk in second year."

"I'm not sure." Harry said thoughtfully as he looked over at the headmaster. "Why don't we go find out?" Taking her by the hand, he led them over to where Dumbledore was looking around at the injured students with a glazed look on his face.

Clearing his throat, Harry spoke once he knew that he had Dumbledore's attention, "Excuse me, sir. Why haven't you called Fawkes to help the injured students? Daphne Greengrass is hurt pretty badly."

Dumbledore looked down at Harry Potter, the twinkle gone from his normally expressive blue eyes, his somber whisper was barely audible above the din, "Alas, Fawkes has just had a burning day and is currently sitting on his perch in front of my fireplace. Why didn't you block that spell, Mr. Potter?"

White-hot fury flooded through their bond and Hermione almost winced. She had become so used to Harry's flashes of emotions that she was quite good at schooling her own features behind a blank mask. While pushing tranquil thoughts through their bond, Hermione put her arm around his waist in a show of support.

Harry took a couple of deep, calming, breaths while he focused on Hermione's feelings. Blowing up at the Headmaster would not be a good thing right now.

Finally reigning in his anger, Harry politely rebuked, "First of all, I didn't know that he was going to fire a Blasting Hex at me. The impact from that spell would have injured me even if I managed to put up a shield. Secondly, I was standing at the head of the isle between the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables. There were a lot more students sitting there and the damage could have been even more severe if the hex had deflected off my shield and hit one of those tables."

Before Dumbledore could turn Harry's words or actions against him, Hermione stepped in and asked in concern, "Excuse me, sir. Why aren't you helping the professors heal the wounded?"

Surprised at the question, Dumbledore shifted his attention to Miss Granger and said, "I think that the teachers have things under control." Looking around the room at his teachers, he found them all working on injured students. With a tone of finality, Dumbledore said, "Now, if you will excuse me, I have to file some paperwork to make Mr. Malfoy's expulsion official." before stepping around the two teens and heading for his office.

Stunned by Dumbledore's abrupt departure, Harry took stock of the situation and dragged Hermione towards Madam Pomfrey. When they arrived where the Mediwitch and their Potions Professor were working, they met with a gruesome site.

There was blood everywhere. Daphne's robes were torn open, revealing a mass of cuts and pieces of wood sticking out of her body and her arm had been amputated at the shoulder joint. The wound had a charred look to it and Harry realized that they must have used fire to stop the bleeding by cauterizing the remaining flesh.

Hermione turned around and hastily stepped back out of the privacy screens before vomiting all over the floor of the Great Hall.

Harry fought down the bile rising in his throat and burned the image in his mind. The scene in front of him was a stark reminder that

innocents could and would get hurt in any conflict no matter how careful you were.

Quietly, so he wouldn't break their concentration, Harry asked, "Is there anything that I can do to help?"

Snape didn't even bother to look up, he recognized Potter's voice easily. His voice was without its usual snarl when he spoke, "Mr. Potter, we are very busy here at the moment. If you want to help, start checking the injured students that haven't been treated yet."

Seeing Madam Pomfrey nodding in agreement with Snape, Harry replied, "Yes, sir." and stepped out of the enclosure, never noticing the trail of bloody footprints he was leaving behind.

Looking over at Hermione, he grimaced and asked, "Are you going to be alright?"

When she looked up at him, her eyes were bloodshot from throwing up and crying at the same time. It was her first experience with how dangerous a spell could really be. Wiping her mouth on a napkin that Ginny handed to her, quietly, she said, "Eventually."

Harry rubbed her back gently in understanding before turning his attention to the rest of the group. He noticed that they all seemed a bit green but seemed willing to help.

In a commanding tone that they had never heard him use before, Harry said, "Hermione, I want you, Neville, and Ginny to head up to the Hospital Wing and get some extra medical supplies. Madam Pomfrey and Professor Snape are tied up and the other teachers are going to need some assistance."

The three teens nodded and dashed off towards the Hospital Wing at a run.

Turning his attention to Fred and George, Harry said solemnly, "Professor Snape wants us to treat the students that the teachers haven't gotten to yet. I figured that you two would be able to handle

the blood better. If you can't treat a wound, just bandage it until a professor or Madam Pomfrey is free."

With identical nods, the normally rambunctious Weasley twins made their way over to the injured students to lend a hand where they could.

Focusing on his magic, Harry allowed it to direct him to an injured student that was sitting slightly away from the crowd. Kneeling down next to her, softly he said, "Where are you hurt?"

The look of pain on the young witch's face was agonizing to see. When she removed her hand, Harry was shocked to see a piece of the table the size of a railroad spike protruding from her left forearm. gingerly, he took her injured arm and lifted it up to better inspect the wound.

His gulped when he saw that the shard had been driven through her arm. She was bleeding profusely but no one had noticed because she was holding her injured arm against her black school robes. Looking closely at her face, Harry realized that she was paler than usual because of the blood loss and that her eyes were out of focus.

Gently, he lowered her to the floor, placed his own school robes beneath her feet, and laid her injured arm across her abdomen. Soothingly, he said, "I need to fetch Madam Pomfrey. Stay still, I'll be right back."

Sprinting back to the school healer, he blurted, "Madam Pomfrey, Tracey Davis is badly injured and no one noticed. She's lost a lot of blood where a piece of the table pierced her left arm."

Not even looking up from her work, Poppy said brusquely, "Take a Blood Replenishing Potion from my bag and bandage her injury as tightly as possible. I'll be there shortly." Looking up into Mr. Potter's eyes, she said, "Don't leave her, she may go into shock if she hasn't already. Good job catching her injury before it was too late, Mr. Potter."

Harry knelt down and rifled through her medical bag and withdrew the proper potion, a few bandages, then ran back to Tracey. gingerly, he

lifted her back into position with her head across his thighs and said softly, "Madam Pomfrey wants you to take this potion for the blood loss and then I'm going to bandage your arm. She'll take care of you as soon as she's finished helping Daphne."

Tracey Davis looked up into the eyes of her nurse and focused on him for the first time. Harry Potter was the last person that she expected to see helping her and the shock was plainly visible on her face.

She swallowed without conscious thought as he tilted some of the potion into her mouth, her gaze never leaving his. "Th...Thank you." she rasped, just before she passed out.

As Harry was about to pour another measure of potion into her mouth, Tracey's eyes rolled up into her head and she began to convulse. While he tried to keep her from injuring herself further, Harry yelled as loud as he could, "Help!"

In the mass of confusion, no one noticed a flashbulb from a camera going off; forever immortalizing the moment. Changing back into her Animagus form, Rita flew over to a wall sconce and settled down for a very juicy story, ignoring the cries for help around her.

Madam Pomfrey was just finishing up with one of the wounds on Daphne's chest when she heard Harry's yell. Checking her patient's vital signs, she said urgently, "Severus, Miss Greengrass is stable for now. I need to see to Miss Davis." Without waiting for his response, she stood up and made her way over towards Mr. Potter.

A whispered, "Good luck." from Severus Snape was lost amongst the din.

Madam Pomfrey surveyed the situation in front of her as she knelt down next to the two teens. The first thing that she noticed was the extremely pale color of Tracey's skin and the large wooden spike that was sticking out of her forearm.

The clinical part of her mind noticed the good job Mr. Potter was doing to prevent any further injury to Miss Davis as she convulsed.

While running her wand the length of Tracey's body, she was muttering an incantation to check for vital signs.

"Minerva!" Poppy shouted. The results from her spell were much worse than she feared. Miss Davis had lost a tremendous amount of blood, if she lost much more, her heart could fail. As it was, some of her organs were already shutting down from the blood loss.

Turning her attention to Mr. Potter, she noticed him looking down at Miss Davis with wide eyes. Calmly, she said, "Harry," when he looked up at her with those piercing green eyes, she continued, "When she stops shaking, I'm going to need you to pour the rest of that potion down her throat as soon as I say so."

Harry nodded in understanding and grasped the potion firmly in his hand waiting for her word.

Minerva bustled over as quickly as possible when she heard the Matron's call for help. Arriving at the scene, she quickly conjured up more privacy screens before asking in her thick Scottish brogue, "What do you need me to do?"

Poppy's tired eyes glanced up at the Transfiguration Professor; this wasn't the type of injuries that she was used to dealing with at Hogwarts. Sighing in relief, she said urgently, "Minerva, I need you to get some additional healers here. We have at least two students that need to be transferred to Saint Mungo's."

Moving as fast as she could, Minerva McGonagall headed towards the nearest floo to call Saint Mungo's for some help. As she was leaving the Great Hall, she spied the Hogwart's Poltergeist, Peeves, madly cackling with glee at the destruction and chaos. Furious beyond belief at the annoying spirit, she did what Mr. Filch had wanted to do for years. She exorcised him with a swish of her wand without even breaking her stride.

Poppy noticed that the girl's convulsions were ending so she said commandingly, "Now, Mr. Potter." as she began treating the wound in Tracey's arm to get the bleeding stopped.

When he was finished pouring the potion down Tracey's throat, Harry asked, "What do you need me to do now, Madam Pomfrey?"

Looking into Harry's eyes, Poppy could easily see that he was determined to help and would do what was necessary to see things through to the end. Relieved that she didn't have to do this alone, she said, "I need you to vanish the piece of wood in her arm and then I'm going to start closing the wound."

Turning her attention back to the unconscious girl's arm, she snapped, "Now!" The moment that the stake was vanished, blood spurted everywhere. It was as she had feared; the arteries in the arm had been severed below the elbow. She quickly conjured a tourniquet and began wrapping it around Tracey's bicep while keeping her other hand clamped over the pulsing wound. Shifting her gaze to Mr. Potter, she said urgently, "I need you to keep tightening this tourniquet until the bleeding stops so I can heal her arm."

Harry didn't say a thing; he just took the tourniquet and began tightening it down just like Madam Pomfrey was doing moments before.

As the bleeding began to lessen, Poppy was able to see what she was doing and began repairing the damaged arteries. After a few tense minutes, she finished fixing the arteries and had begun to seal up the wound. Relieved, she said, "Mr. Potter, please begin slowly loosening the tourniquet."

Relief flooded through Poppy as she felt Miss Davis' arm begin to warm back up from the flow of fresh blood. Slumping down on her haunches, she looked up at a blood covered Harry Potter and said tiredly, "Great job, Mr. Potter. Miss Davis is going to be just fine. If it wasn't for you, she would have bled to death."

Suddenly very tired, Harry leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. After a few moments respite, he opened his eyes and looked down at the girl lying across his lap. Her skin color was returning to normal and her breathing had evened out.

Unconsciously, Harry reached out and brushed the hair away from Tracey's face before beginning to use his fingers to untangle the knots. He was unsure how he felt about what had happened in the last fifteen minutes.

He was confident that Draco was going to throw a spell at him once he started goading the blonde haired ponce. He was extremely surprised by Malfoy's spell choice though. At most, Harry was hoping that it was going to be something harmless but uncomfortable. Nothing prepared him for the lethal spell that the arrogant brat had sent rocketing his way.

It was ironic that Malfoy ended up teaching Harry, not one, but two important lessons during the disaster. The first was that all witches and wizards were armed and dangerous. The second lesson was that you should never taunt someone without being prepared for the consequences.

Harry knew that he didn't have control over Malfoy's choices, short of using the Imperious Curse, but his own actions did lead to a very bad situation. That being said, he was glad that it wasn't his friends, or heaven forbid, Hermione, on the receiving end of Malfoy's disastrous spell choice.

Albus Dumbledore had returned to the Great Hall just as Harry Potter yelled out for Madam Pomfrey's assistance. Suppressing his presence, he stuck to the outer edges of the hall until he was about fifteen feet from where Miss Davis was being treated so he could observe Mr. Potter more closely.

He knew that Harry had goaded Mr. Malfoy into attacking, the question burning in his mind was, 'Did he do that with the intent to harm the Slytherin students?' Dumbledore feared that Harry had already started down a dark path based upon the boy's reactions to the tasks in the Triwizard Tournament.

Just as Harry was beginning to relax, he felt the familiar presence of Albus Dumbledore. When he spoke, his voice clearly conveyed his displeasure towards the Headmaster.

Dumbledore was ripped from his thoughts when the very person he was dwelling upon said in a very frosty voice, "Is there something you want to say, Professor Dumbledore?"

Poppy was startled by the tone in Mr. Potter's voice and by the fact that she had not heard Albus step into the cordoned off area that they were inside.

Plastering a smile on his face, Dumbledore said in his proud grandparent voice, completely ignoring Harry's tone, "Indeed, Mr. Potter. I wanted to congratulate you on saving Miss Davis' life. Had you not noticed her injury she most certainly would have died before ever being treated."

Annoyed, Harry had to struggle to keep his voice low so he didn't disturb Tracey when he growled, "It wouldn't have been necessary if you would have taught the students that their actions have consequences a long time ago."

Minerva McGonagall had just entered the Great Hall with a few Healers from Saint Mungo's. She directed one of the Healers to the cordoned off area where Professor Snape was still working on Miss Greengrass and one to check on the students that were being helped by the Weasley twins. She beckoned to the third Healer, a trainee named Augustus Pye, to follow her to see Miss Davis.

As they entered the cordoned off area, they both heard Harry Potter telling off the Headmaster. Shocked, Minerva snapped angrily, "Mr. Potter! Now is not the time for that discussion!" She was well aware that Harry was correct, but it was something that she felt should be discussed in private, not in the confines of the Great Hall in front of witnesses.

The look of defiance in Harry's eyes almost caused Minerva to rebuke him again but when Mr. Potter didn't speak, she wisely held her own tongue in check. Turning her attention to Madam Pomfrey, she reported, "I managed to grab two Healers and one Trainee. Mr. Pye is the Trainee." she said as she waved her hand in his general direction.

Relief flooded through Poppy when Minerva mentioned the extra help. Sounding exhausted, she said, "Thank you, Minerva. The worst of everything is under control, I hope. Please have them check all the injured students over just to be safe. Mr. Pye can assist me in getting Miss Davis ready for transportation to Saint Mungo's."

Minerva nodded and headed over to make sure Madam Pomfrey's instructions were carried out properly.

Harry was about to get out of the way when Healer Pye spoke for the first time, his voice surprisingly high, "Don't move just yet, Mr. Potter. We need to get her onto a stretcher first."

Dumbledore had been listening to the conversation with half an ear and at the mention of a stretcher; he conjured one with a lazy flick of his wand. Eyes twinkling, he asked helpfully, "Is there anything else you require, Healer Pye?"

Awed that Albus Dumbledore was speaking to him, Augustus stammered, "N...No thank you, sir. I think we can manage it from here. Th...Thank you for your help."

Impressed with Dumbledore's skill at manipulation despite himself, Harry took the lesson to heart. With that one action, the Headmaster made Healer Pye believe that he was the one to do the majority of the work before the Healers from Saint Mungo's arrived. Mentally shrugging at the irony, Harry figured it was a school and he did learn some very important lessons today, even if it wasn't in a classroom.

As the Headmaster walked away, Harry pondered Malfoy's situation. He knew that Sirius and everyone else needed to know about this tonight. Just as he was about to head off to find Hermione, Tracey reached out and grabbed his wrist, stopping him in his tracks.

When he leaned down next to her, she croaked out, "Thank you, Harry Potter. I owe you my life." Too tired to say anything else, she closed her eyes and drifted off into a healing sleep.

Surprised, Harry just stood there and watched them carry the young woman out of the Great Hall.

A few minutes later, a very bedraggled looking group that consisted of Hermione, Neville, Ginny, Fred, and George joined him. All of them had blood on their clothes in some fashion but none more so than Harry. He looked as if a fire hose had sprayed him with blood.

Silently, he led them out to his garden down by the lake. Once they arrived, he checked the area for more Eavesdropping spells. Finding two, he held up his finger to his lips before miming covering your ears.

When everyone had safely covered their ears, Harry pulled out his wand and pointed it at his throat. With the Sonorous Charm active, he stepped up to the rock that the Eavesdropping Spell had been cast upon and shouted as loud as he could in his amplified voice, “The Chudley Cannons stink!”

The sound was deafening, birds scattered from their perches in the low hung branches in the trees while Harry’s friends all cringed and tried to cover their ears tighter.

Back in the castle, Albus Dumbledore winced at the volume of Harry’s shout. He knew that his ears were going to ring for hours and a headache was fast developing. He quickly deactivated the other Listening Charms with a frown on his face; he did not want to suffer that fate again. Rubbing his temples gingerly, he wondered what to do now that Mr. Potter had discovered another one of his tricks of always knowing what was going on.

In the garden, Hermione could feel the mirth and a touch of smugness coming from Harry. Curious, she asked, “Did you find more Listening Charms?” When he nodded yes, she sighed and said resignedly, “You would think that he would have gotten the hint when I blocked the sound from the area last time.”

The wicked smile that crossed Harry’s face complimented his smug tone well, “Oh, I’m sure that Dumbledore got the message today. If I ever find another one of those things, I’m not going to be so nice next time.”

Remembering that they were all still covered in blood, Hermione drew her wand and began siphoning it off herself before moving on to Harry and the others. She never noticed that she performed the spell silently.

Everyone else, however, did. They were all giving Harry and Hermione shrewd looks before George piped up, "Okay, spill. How come the two of you are so good at silent casting?"

Harry and Hermione shared a look before she answered for the both of them, "We have been practicing our silent casting all year for an hour or two per day if we have the time."

Before anyone could say more on the subject, Fred interrupted, his tone curious, "What I want to know is what you meant about Dumbledore putting Listening Charms down here?"

The corners of Harry's eyes crinkled slightly, the only obvious physical sign of his annoyance towards the Headmaster. His voice was carefully controlled as he slipped into the state of Occlumency that he guarded his emotions behind, "For some reason, Dumbledore has been keeping tabs on me for a long time. Professor McGonagall removed a Monitoring Charm from me earlier this year."

The four purebloods all gasped at Harry's revelation. An invasion of privacy on that level was almost unheard of outside of a prisoner.

George's face clouded over into an angry expression that Harry was pretty sure that he had never seen on the normally gregarious twin. Moments later, Fred's expression mirrored George's as he too worked out what that Monitoring Spell really meant.

The anger in their voices was easily detectable as they said in tandem, "You mean that Dumbledore knew what your life was like at the Dursleys in your second year?"

Neville and Ginny were at a loss. Most of the conversation between Harry and the twins was going right over their heads. Ginny understood a little from bits and pieces that she had picked up from

her parent's discussions when they thought that they were alone, but she still didn't have the full picture.

Uncomfortable about the abrupt change in the conversation, Harry felt that a simple, yet direct, approach was needed. Sighing in resignation, he whispered, "Yes, he did know." while never meeting their eyes.

Hermione had moved over to Harry and had wrapped her arm around his shoulders in support. Leaning over, she whispered in his ear, "It's okay, Harry. You can tell them, they already know most of it and Fred and George will figure it out soon enough."

Straightening up, Harry turned and planted a tender kiss on her forehead before saying, "Why don't we all have a seat, this could take a while."

Curious, the four teens sat down in a semi-circle facing Harry and Hermione. They listened, enraptured, as Harry gave them the basic details of his life up to his third year at Hogwarts over the next couple of hours.

Harry was finally able to tell someone other than Hermione about his previous home life and properly thank Fred and George for rescuing him that fateful evening. The emotion he felt at their finally knowing more about his home life shocked him, it was relief instead of shame.

Harry's story allowed Fred, George, and Ginny, a better understanding of Harry's reactions to food and freedom when he first came to visit the Burrow. Neville discovered that his own life wasn't so bad after all, and in a showing of true Gryffindor Courage, he told them about his parents.

Those two hours in the garden by the lake cemented the bonds of friendship between the teens for life.

Chapter 34: Another year gone by.

They were all getting ready to head back up to the castle after spending the afternoon together, talking about their lives. The sun had started to set, bathing the grounds in an orange hue that Ron would have loved had he been outside.

“Fred, George, can you wait a second before you two head back up?” Harry asked politely.

Hermione had a suspicion about what Harry was about to do so she deftly steered Ginny and Neville back up to Gryffindor Tower. Looking back over her shoulder, she smiled at Harry and mouthed silently, ‘I love you.’

Harry returned the gesture then turned his attention to the curious but smiling twins. Gathering his thoughts, he asked them in a formal tone, “Are you two still serious about opening a joke shop?”

The twins turned to face each other, an entire silent conversation taking place between them in the span of a couple of seconds, before Fred finally spoke up, with a hint of curiosity in his voice when he said, “We do. At first we are probably going to have to be a mail order catalogue until we can save up enough gold to rent a shop in Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade.”

“How much do you think that you two will need to get started?” Harry asked them.

After cocking his head to the side slightly while he did some quick math in his head, George said, “Umm...somewhere around five hundred galleons give or take a hundred. That should allow us to rent a place for a year and still have enough to buy supplies to make our products.”

Harry knew that the twins were brilliant; they just hid it behind their facades as pranksters. Looking at each one in turn, he said seriously, “I want in. I’ll invest nine hundred galleons in your business providing that you make me an equal partner. Deal?”

Two identical grins broke out on the twin's faces as they chirped in unison, "It's a deal!"

Fred added, "We'll draw something up to make it official and get it to you as soon as possible."

Seriously, George said, "Thank you, Harry. This means a lot to us."

In a quiet whisper, Harry said, "I know what it's like to have dreams and I'm glad I can help."

Fred clapped a hand on Harry's shoulder in a gesture of friendship and understanding while George and Harry shook hands.

Turning as one, the three teens headed back up to the Gryffindor Tower with smiles on their faces and thoughts of the new joke shop running through their heads.

Upon stepping into the Gryffindor Common Room, the hue of red on the furniture and carpets caused Hermione to have a flashback to the carnage in the Great Hall.

Desperately trying to keep her composure, Hermione retreated to the Girl's dormitory to wash off the nonexistent blood. Even though she had used a spell to remove the dried blood and had scrubbed her hands and arms, it still felt like she couldn't get it off her.

Practically ripping off her jumper, she stepped into the shower stall, turned on the water, and grabbed a bar of soap and began frantically washing her arms. After scrubbing for five minutes, her arms and hands were an angry shade of red but she still didn't feel like the blood had been washed away.

Sinking to the floor of the shower stall, she hugged her knees to her chest and wept silently as she let the scalding hot water rain down on her head and shoulders.

Harry was just entering the Gryffindor Common Room when he felt Hermione's despair flooding their bond. Looking up in the direction of

where he knew she was, a frown marred his face before he quickly strode over to the steps to the Girl's Dormitories.

Remembering that the stairs would turn into a slide if he tried to walk up them, Harry whipped out his wand, silently conjured a set of wooden stairs. He made sure that they didn't touch the stone steps before vaulting up them to find Hermione.

Using their bond to guide him, Harry quietly slipped into the fourth year girl's dorm and headed towards the showers and his distraught wife.

Fred and George stood there, slack jawed, when Harry conjured a wooden set of stairs and practically ran all the way up. Thankfully, no one else was in the Common Room but them when Harry pulled his little trick. With a nod to each other, they vanished the set of stairs before anyone saw them and could think to duplicate the feat.

George leaned over and whispered in awe, "I can't believe that we never thought of that. The alarm didn't go off either."

Fred nodded before replying slowly, "Yeah. Me neither. I wonder what Harry was so concerned about? Did you see his face?"

"I did." George replied softly while looking back up the steps. "Keep a watch in case a professor shows up. I'm going to send him a note."

While Fred moved over to guard the entrance to the Gryffindor Tower, George hastily scribbled a note to Harry and tapped it with his wand while muttering an incantation. The piece of parchment folded itself into a paper airplane and headed off towards Harry.

Rejoining his twin, Fred said, "I'm glad that we learned that spell from dad. Do you think that we should keep an eye out for a professor until he gets back?"

Furrowing his brow, George said, "Yeah. We probably should. You want to hit the showers first?"

"Nah." said Fred as he flopped down into the couch that faced the portrait hole. "I'll keep watch."

Giving his twin a nod, George hurried off to get cleaned up before the Leaving Feast.

Just as Harry was about to push open the door to the girl's showers, George's memo hit him in the back of the head. Leaning down, he picked up the note and quickly read through it before placing it in his pocket.

Stepping into the showers, he could hear the water running in the stall furthest from the door. Checking the room to make sure that they were alone, he strode over to her stall and called out softly, "Hermione?" When she didn't reply, he tried again, his voice full of concern, "Hermione, I'm coming in."

Opening up the shower stall, the sight that greeted him broke his heart. She was curled up in the corner of the stall, water from the shower splashing down on her head, rocking back and forth. Her arms from the elbows down were an angry red.

Ignoring the fact that she was topless, he shrugged off his robes and sat down on the floor right next to her. Slowly, he put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her into his chest as the warm water soaked into his clothes.

Hermione's reaction to Harry's loving embrace was immediate. She clung to him as if her life depended upon his touch and began crying harder. Her sobs echoed throughout the showers as she tried to rid herself of the image of her bloody hands and the carnage that she had seen in the Great Hall.

Returning her embrace just as tightly, Harry used his free hand to put up a Silencing Spell on the shower stall before wrapping both of his arms around her. It wouldn't do if any of her nosey roommates decided to come in only to discover Harry in their showers.

He didn't know how long they sat their together under the water from the shower, nor did he care. Hermione's well being came first and he

was perfectly willing to sit there all night if need be. He knew what she was going through; he went through something similar after his first and second years at Hogwarts but he didn't have anyone to help him through it at the time so he suffered in silence.

Her sobs had finally subsided but she was still clinging desperately to Harry. Looking up into his eyes, she could see the concern and love in them. Slowly, she reached up, cupped his cheek in her palm, and whispered, "Thank you. I love you."

Giving her a soft smile, he said warmly, "I love you too." Squeezing her tighter, he asked, "Feeling better?" He noticed that her eyes didn't seem as haunted right now but he knew that it would be a while before the images faded.

"A bit." Hermione whispered as she traced patterns with her fingers on his soaked shirt. She desperately wanted to forget the horrible events that happened earlier and she began to unbutton his shirt while placing light kisses on his neck and shoulders.

Harry started slightly when Hermione nipped the base of his neck lightly with her teeth. He was a bit confused by her sudden change in demeanor. As her kisses became hungrier, his body began to respond through his confusion and a soft moan escaped his lips as she suckled on his throat.

When Hermione heard Harry moan, it drove her need to be close to him even higher. With an animalistic growl, she ripped his shirt open and began trailing kisses down his chest.

Thoroughly confused, Harry didn't know what to do. One minute he was consoling Hermione and the next, she was ripping his clothes off and doing her best to drive him crazy. Another moan escaped his lips before he pulled Hermione into his lap and began kissing her with the same desperate hunger that seemed to engulf her.

When her hands began fumbling with the front of his trousers, it was like a splash of cold water for him and he realized what they were about to do if he didn't stop her soon. Gently, he removed her hands and pulled her against his chest in a hug while saying in a husky

voice full of love and desire, "Hermione, I want to just as much as you do, but I want our first time to be special and in our bed. Especially while we are in the girl's showers while you're trying to push aside the events from earlier today."

Harry's words crashed through her emotional, and hormonal, haze like a bucket of ice-cold water. Slowly, her mind began to clear and she realized where they were and what they were doing. Hermione turned a brilliant shade of scarlet, as she finally comprehended that she was topless and sitting on her obviously excited husband.

Before she could apologize, Harry placed a single finger on her lips, looked into her bright cinnamon colored eyes, and practically purred, "Don't apologize. I promise that when we are both ready, we can pick up right where we left off." Nuzzling her nose with his own, he whispered, "I love you, Hermione Potter."

"And I you, my husband." Hermione replied softly as she wrapped her arms around Harry's back in a bear hug as his words fanned her desires.

After a few minutes, he turned his head slightly and whispered into her ear, "Are you ready to get dried off yet?"

Hermione buried her face in Harry's shoulder in response to his question. She wasn't quite ready to leave the comfort of his embrace so she held on tighter. After a few moments, she murmured in his ear, "I don't want to go to the Leaving Feast...I don't think that I'm ready to go back in there."

Rubbing his hands softly up and down her bare back as she clung to him, Harry whispered back, "That's fine. I don't really want to go either." The Great Hall was about the last place that he wanted to be as well because he knew that seeing it again was going to be very difficult the first time they did.

Summoning his soaked cloak, Harry wrapped it around Hermione's back and clipped it just above her shoulders before pulling it completely closed to protect her modesty. He reached up with his

hand and fumbled for a second before finding the shut off valve for the water. Carefully, he helped her to her feet and called out, "Winky!"

There was a small pop signaling the arrival of the diminutive elf. She took one look at Harry and Hermione's appearances and her gaze softened before she kindly said, "I will be right back with fresh clothes for you both." With a snap of her fingers, she dried the soaked teens before popping back to the house to gather some clean clothes for them.

A moment later, there were two distinct pops and both of the Potter House-elves were standing in the shower stall with a bundle of clean clothes for their masters.

Dobby stepped forward and said, "Master Harry, I will take you to the boy's dormitories so you can change. Winky will see to Miss Hermione, sir."

Harry looked over at Hermione and when she gave him a small nod, he held out his hand to Dobby and they were vanished without a noise only to reappear silently in the fourth year boy's showers.

Dobby steered Harry into a stall and handed him the fresh clothes as he said, "Just leave you clothes in there and Dobby will take care of them, sir."

Amused at being handled so expertly by his little friend, Harry chuckled and said, "Right away, sir."

Dobby blushed and gave Harry a final push into the stall before closing the door. While he was waiting for his master to change, he busied himself with tidying up the rest of the bathroom.

Winky was helping her normally talkative mistress into fresh clothes with an increasing amount of worry. Something must have happened to cause such a drastic change in her behavior. Tentatively, she asked, "Miss, do you need anything or do you want me to give a message to your parents?"

Hermione had been on autopilot as Winky helped her with her robes and it took her a couple of seconds to process the question before

she could answer, “Yes, would you tell my parents what happened, I don’t think that I’m ready for that yet.”

“Of course, Miss.” Winky said, hiding her concern. “Do you need me for anything else?” When Hermione nodded, no, Winky said, “Just call when you are ready to return home, Miss.” After a small bow, she popped off to the kitchens to get some answers about why her mistress was unhappy.

Harry had finished dressing while Hermione was still getting ready. After saying goodbye to Dobby, he headed down to the Common Room to wait for her to come down.

When Harry stepped into the Common Room, Fred and George were staring, open mouthed, at him. Confused, he asked, “What?”

“Blimey!” Fred cried in shock.

George looked just as stupefied before he found his voice and blurted, “How did you do that?”

Thoroughly confused, Harry asked, “Do what?”

Fred and George got up from their spots on the sofas and hurried over towards Harry. Urgently, Fred whispered, “First you silently conjure a set of stairs up to the girl’s dormitories and then you come down the boys stairs when we know that you didn’t come back down the steps to get to your dorm.”

“So, spill it! How did you do that?” George asked with a tone of awe mixed with curiosity in his voice.

Harry ran his hand through his hair, messing it up even more than usual, before he answered with a smirk on his face, “Now that would be telling. Thanks for the note though.”

Sensing Hermione’s presence, he looked over towards the steps to the Girl’s Dormitories and gave her a small smile. Keeping his eyes fixed on Hermione, he said to Fred and George, “Excuse me.”

Fred and George watched in silence as Harry walked over to Hermione and pulled her into a hug that she heartily returned. They could see the pained expression on her face and deciding not to impose; they quietly slipped from the Common Room and headed down towards the Great Hall quietly discussing the very big puzzle that was Harry Potter.

After watching Fred and George leave, Harry quietly asked Hermione, “Are you hungry?”

Nodding yes to his question, Hermione leaned back a touch and looked into his compassion filled eyes. Giving him a small smile in return, she said, “Would you be terribly upset if we ate with my parents?”

Harry understood what she wanted and he was thankful that Hermione’s parents were still around to provide a level of support that up until this year, he had been lacking and didn’t believe existed. Squeezing her slightly to let her know he was okay with her request, he called out, “Dobby!”

When their faithful house-elf appeared with a pop and a smile, Harry asked him, “Would you please take us home?”

Seeing the tired look in their eyes, Dobby squeaked happily, “I would be delighted!” He reached out, grasped each of their hands, and vanished from Gryffindor Tower.

Albus Dumbledore was sitting in his usual high backed throne in the Great Hall as he surveyed the student’s in front of him. The chatter was subdued, probably due to the day’s events, but nothing that he hadn’t expected. What did surprise him was that Harry Potter and Hermione Granger were missing in addition to the injured students.

Carefully, he scanned the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables to make sure that he hadn’t missed them sitting somewhere unusual. Sighing into his napkin as he wiped his mouth, Dumbledore realized that he had been letting too many things slip through his fingers for the past few weeks.

The biggest of those things were The-Boy-Who-Lived, Harry Potter, and the disappearances of Alastor Moody and Igor Karkaroff. He was sure that they were somehow connected and he silently vowed to find the underlying cause of this particular mystery.

Dumbledore had already set up a rotating schedule of guards to keep a watch on Harry this summer at his relative's house without the boy being aware. Having him guarded would solve a couple of potential problems. First, it would give him the ability to keep Harry isolated from the magical world for another summer, especially once he forbid everyone to contact him because the Owl Post was no longer secure. Secondly, when he allowed Harry to visit the Weasleys, or his godfather, later in the summer, it would help put him back in the boy's good graces.

Turning his thoughts back to his missing friend, Dumbledore's eyes tightened as he came to the realization that Alastor was probably dead already. His desire to keep the potential imposter close was a strategic gamble that had probably backfired. To make matters worse, he didn't know who had been impersonating Moody for the past ten months. Meaning, if it was a Death Eater, they were now running free. His regret over Moody was one of the few times that he prayed that he was wrong.

However, Dumbledore had no regrets about Igor Karkaroff. He knew that Igor was a dead man walking the instant the Voldemort was reborn. Karkaroff had betrayed his fellow Death Eaters in open court for a pardon. If Voldemort didn't kill him, then one of his Death Eaters would.

The house-elves were just sending dessert up to the house tables and the appearance of a multitude of sweets distracted him momentarily. He reached out and served himself a generous portion of pumpkin pie with a large dollop of cream on top. Sweets were one of Dumbledore's guilty pleasures. He had other vices, but none that brought him as much pleasure as a good sweet.

When the talisman around his neck remained cool against his skin, he lifted the forkful of pie to his mouth and began eating. It wouldn't do anything good for morale if he were to be seen checking all of his

food and drink for poisons. People would think him just as crazy as Mad-Eye Moody if he started doing that. In order to maintain his façade, he had created the amulet to pulse if there was a foreign substance in his food or drink. It had even saved his life on a couple of instances.

Finishing off the last of his pie, Dumbledore surveyed the hall in front of him. The students from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons had already returned to their respective schools so the hall seemed much larger now.

The house-elves had removed the extra sections from the house tables, leaving the students clustered closer together, which was part of the reason that Mr. Malfoy's spell had been so devastating. With so many students in close quarters, he knew that it was really dumb luck that no one had died.

About the only good thing that happened during the day was when Narcissa Malfoy sent one of their elves to pick up Draco's belongings after he had informed her of her son's expulsion and subsequent arrest. He had no doubt that he was going to have a long week at the Wizengamot dealing with the aftermath of Draco's disaster.

Slowly getting to his feet, he strode over to the podium at the edge of the raised dais where the head table sat. The students all noticed the headmaster and fell silent in anticipation of his upcoming speech.

Plastering a kind smile on his face, his voice easily carried the length of the entire hall when he finally spoke, "Another school year has gone by, faster for some and slower for others, I'm sure." Dumbledore paused to look at each of the house tables before continuing in a much more serious tone, "Many of you have no doubt heard the rumors that Voldemort has returned."

There were numerous shrieks at the mention of the Dark Lord's name and a few of the younger students were sniffling in fear. Ignoring the whimpers, Dumbledore held his hands up for quiet. His voice held an edge of command in it when he resumed speaking, "I assure you that it was just a rumor. However, that does not mean that you should not be, as your defense professor was fond of saying, constantly vigilant."

Giving the students another warm, grandfatherly smile, he said happily, "As a treat, there will be a late night snack in the Great Hall this evening at ten and curfew for the fourth years and up will be midnight." Listening to the students cheers, he gave them all another smile before saying, "Now, I suggest that you get your packing done this evening so you may enjoy the rest of your time at Hogwarts."

Dumbledore stepped down from the raised dais and strode out of the Great Hall listening to the now happier chatter coming from his students. He had originally intended to confirm that Voldemort was back but he realized that Cornelius would do everything in his power to discredit him if he did. Therefore, he felt that it was in the best interests of the war effort if he retained his positions of power within the ministry where he would be able to better combat the Death Eaters that operated in the political arena.

Albus' biggest fear about the upcoming war was that the government would fold without any resistance if he were to be pushed out of power. Fudge was a parrot that spouted the views of whoever was paying him the most that week. Unfortunately, that meant that it was Lucius Malfoy doing the whispering in Fudge's ear and that was never a good thing. Now that Voldemort had a body again, it was going to get a lot worse rapidly.

The fact that he had just undermined Harry Potter's word in the castle was a bonus. It would make influencing his wayward charge that much easier during the next school year.

Back in London, Harry and Hermione were sitting down to dinner with her parents, Sirius, Remus, and Andromeda. Ted and Dora were still at work but they would everyone as soon as their shifts were over.

John and Annabelle had been surprised when Winky had arrived with quite the tale about the events from earlier in the day before going off to inform Sirius and Remus per Annabelle's request. They were extremely grateful that the curse had missed Harry after Sirius explained what that particular spell would do if it hit someone directly.

When the teens had arrived home with Dobby, the adults were already in the kitchen waiting for them. Hermione launched herself into her parent's arms as soon as she saw them. Sometimes you just needed the reassurance from an adult. It had been Hermione's first experience with how destructive magic could be. She had heard, and read, about horrific things before, but there is no experience like living through something yourself. Unfortunately, she knew that today's events would not be an isolated incident with the coming conflict.

Harry was mildly surprised when Hermione's parents drew him into a hug once Sirius and Remus released him. Having a loving family was a concept that he was still adjusting to.

When everyone was settled, Annabelle asked the teens, "Are you two going to be okay?"

Harry looked over at Hermione and squeezed her hand under the table before gazing up at the adults seated at the table and said softly, "Eventually. It's just going to take some time." Hanging his head down slightly, he said in an even quieter tone, "Part of what happened today was my fault, I goaded Malfoy."

That was a bit of a surprise for the adults and it plainly showed on their faces. It was Sirius that spoke up first, his voice was firm but not angry, "Harry, look at me please." When he had Harry's attention, he continued, "Did you tell Malfoy which spell to use?"

Harry shook his head in the negative, but did not speak.

"You are not responsible for Malfoy's bad choices. What would you have done if it he had cast a Stinging Hex at you?" Sirius replied while looking into Harry's eyes.

Taking a moment to think things through, Harry said, "I probably would have shielded so he would have been in trouble for attempting to hex me."

Giving Harry a small smile as his explanation proved his point, Sirius said, "You did the right thing, Harry. That curse would have killed you if your shield faltered or you didn't get one up in time."

"But..." Harry started to say before Remus cut him off stepping into the conversation.

"Let me reiterate, you are not responsible for Malfoy's mistake." Remus said in a soothing tone of voice. He let Harry chew on that for a few seconds before he continued, "Sirius is right, Harry. You need to let go of your guilt over Malfoy's actions. You are not him."

Harry looked at the adults seated around the table and noticed that they all had the same expression of understanding on their faces. Turning to face Hermione, he gazed into her warm cinnamon colored eyes and found what he was looking for.

Her gaze wasn't reproachful, it was grateful. Surprised, he asked her in a small voice, "You...you don't blame me for what happened today?" Harry knew that she had been affected far worse than he had by the aftermath of Draco's spell and it was her forgiveness that he needed most.

Hermione looked into his bright green eyes that were full of guilt before quietly replying, "No, Harry." She reached up, cupped his cheek, and continued, "I'm glad that you had the presence of mind to put your friends out of harm's way and then how you kept your cool afterwards."

Sagging with relief, Harry gave her a tiny smile and mumbled, "Thanks."

Everyone seemed to relax a bit once Harry let go of some of his guilt and dinner proceeded with the accompaniment of pleasant conversation. Just as dessert was being served, a very anxious looking Tonks stepped into the kitchen, her hair cycling through various colors.

Unceremoniously, she plunked herself down in the seat next to Harry and with a grunt pulled the plate of food that Dobby silently slid in front of her and began eating with gusto.

Harry and Hermione were trying not to snicker at Dora's eating habits. They were startlingly similar to Ron's preferred method of eating, lean over the plate and shovel in as much as possible and as quickly as possibly, table manners be damned. Giving it up as a bad job, Harry lost it and began snickering into his napkin while Hermione hung her head and let her long hair muffle her laughter.

Looking over at the two teens, Dora asked with a mouth full of food, "Mwhat?"

"Nymphadora!" Andromeda snapped at her daughter. When Dora's hair cycled to a blushing pink, she continued ranting, "We taught you better manners than that! Now sit up straight and eat like a proper young lady instead of like some Neanderthal!"

Dora cringed at her mother's tone and tried to ignore the snickers coming from everyone else. She quickly sat up straight and resumed eating at a much more dignified pace.

When she was finished, she wiped her mouth and took a sip of water before saying seriously, "I caught Macnair this evening." There were a few raised eyebrows and a smile from Remus at her announcement. "He's in the cell at headquarters." She said before anyone could interrupt her.

Harry and Hermione shared a curious look and mouthed, 'Headquarters?'

Remus was watching the two teens and he decided to tell them the basics about what was going on, "We have another house under the Fidelius Charm that we are using for headquarters. If we capture a Death Eater, we have a cell set up for their use."

"Oh." Harry and Hermione echoed in response to the information.

Reaching into his cloak, Remus pulled out a worn looking book and slid it across the table to them while saying in a lighter tone, "I think this book will give you some information about Harry's Animagus form. I think he is some variant of a Coatl, but I'm not exactly positive."

Eagerly, Hermione snatched the book up and began looking at the pages Remus had tabbed for them.

Harry smiled at her antics and said warmly, “Thanks, Remus.” He knew that Hermione was using the book as a distraction from the day’s events but he did have some more questions about changing the dark ritual Voldemort used and what was going to happen now that the school year had ended.

Looking at the rest of the adults around the table, Harry asked, “What did you find out about the ritual that I changed and how is that going to effect me?”

Hermione had stopped reading when he asked his question and she was now eagerly looking at the adults for an answer as well.

Squirming slightly, Remus looked over at Sirius for permission to tell the tale. When he received permission, he quietly said, “That ritual was supposed to create a new body for Voldemort. When you gave your blood willingly it altered the intent of the ritual.”

Remus paused to gather his thoughts on how to explain everything in a manner that Harry would understand before continuing, “You must understand that this is all speculation, but we believe that it is the correct assumption about why Voldemort survived that fateful night when you defeated him.”

Thinking about the parts of the ritual that he remembered, Harry asked, “By giving my blood freely I broke my connection to Voldemort, didn’t I?” He was pretty sure that was true because of his improved connection with Hermione, but it never hurt to have something confirmed to ease ones fears.

“Yes...” Remus said hesitantly as he processed Harry’s question. After a few moments, he said, “Your scar was probably a Horcrux and when you gave your blood willingly it changed the intent of the ritual. Not only did it create a new body for Voldemort, we think it reunited him with the piece of his soul that was in your scar.”

Andromeda had gone pale during the discussion. She knew the basics, but this was new information to her and it was very disturbing. Horrified, she whispered, "How many Horcruxes do you think that the Dark Lord made?" Being a Black, she knew the general terms of what a Horcux was.

It was Harry that answered her question, with a bombshell of his own, when he said, "I think Voldemort made at least three of them. The diary that I destroyed in my second year was one, my scar, and whatever other item that was keeping him alive until he got his body back."

The magical adults all had horrified expressions on their faces as they looked at each other and then back to Harry.

It was Hermione's leap in logic that conveyed just how far down the path to madness Voldemort had really traveled when she said, "Why just three? Seven is the most magical number in Arithmancy."

Shocked, Harry croaked softly, "Sweet Merlin, seven of them?" The answer to his question blossomed in his mind and he slumped in his chair at the implications. Looking up at the adults, he could see the despair reflected in their faces as they realized how large of an undertaking finding the remaining four vessels that contained the pieces of Voldemort's soul was going to be.

Deciding that a change of scenery would help ease the tension, Annabelle announced, "Let's head to the library for some tea and biscuits."

Everyone followed her in a daze, lost in his or her thoughts. When they arrived, the elves had already placed a tea service with a plate of biscuits on the table. Grabbing a cup of tea, Annabelle settled down into the loveseat with her husband and curled her legs underneath so she was sitting on her feet.

A small smile played across Harry's lips as he looked at Annabelle sitting on the loveseat just as Hermione did when she sat on the couch in the Gryffindor Common Room. He sat down next to Hermione and put his arm around her as she tucked her feet beneath her legs and got comfortable.

The conversation was light because everyone was trying to distract themselves from the daunting task that lay in front of them.

Hermione had resumed reading up on Coatl's with Harry reading over her shoulder.

Remus, Sirius, John, and the recently arrived Ted, were arguing about the merits of Quidditch versus Football and which sport was better.

Andromeda, Annabelle, and Dora were talking quietly about Quidditch and Football but with an entirely different slant. They were going on about how fit the male athletes were much to the annoyance of the men. Their occasional giggles caused everyone else to look up in surprise in some cases and exasperation in others.

Unable to stand the incessant giggling any longer, especially from her mum, Hermione asked, "What's so funny?"

Annabelle and Andromeda were blushing lightly but remained steadfastly silent, refusing to answer Hermione's question. Dora, however, smirked and said, "We were talking about how fit the athletes were that played Quidditch and Football."

Dora was expecting Hermione to stammer out a reply, so when Hermione simply said, "Oh. Okay then." and went back to reading, she was a bit disappointed.

Curious, Dora blurted, "That's it?"

Hermione gazed up from her book and the grin that graced her face was almost predatory in its intensity, "I know perfectly well how good Quidditch is for the male physique, thank you."

No amount of Occlumency was able to keep the blush from creeping up Harry's neck, especially when he felt Hermione's emotions humming through their bond. Wishing he could just melt into the couch, Harry settled for keeping his eyes glued to the book in front of him.

Annabelle, Andromeda, and Dora all turned a bit pink at Hermione's innuendo while John just stared at his daughter in shock. Sirius, Remus, and Ted were failing miserably in their attempts to hold back their snickering.

Unable to stand the tension any longer, Harry blurted, "Can we please change the subject!" His outburst set everyone into fits of laughter at his expense and he was blushing so badly that his face felt like it could light up a dark room.

It was getting late and Remus was anguish over the fact that Harry had pseudo Horcrux and how was he going to tell him about it.

Sirius could see the conflict in his friend's eyes and decided that it should be his responsibility to tell Harry. Speaking loudly enough to be heard over the light chatter, Sirius said, "Harry, there is something else that we need to talk to you about before you two head off to bed."

The tone of Sirius' voice brought all conversation in the room to a screeching halt. Harry leaned slightly forward in his seat while unconsciously tightening his grip on Hermione's shoulder.

Seeing that he had everyone's undivided attention, Sirius continued in a solemn voice, "We think that something else happened when you modified the ritual. There is a very good chance that you now have an anchor to this plane because Voldemort used your blood to construct a new body."

Harry was putting the pieces together and when he finished the thought, his blood ran cold. When he finally spoke, his voice was borderline hysterical, 'You...you mean that I have my own Horcrux?"

Hermione could feel the panic coming from Harry. It was so palpable that she was sure that even if they weren't bonded that she would have been able to feel it. Wrapping her arms around him, she whispered into his ear, "It's okay, Harry. You're not evil; this is just a byproduct of the modified ritual."

He shuddered at the thought of having his own version of a Horcrux. As he thought about Hermione's words, he understood that there was absolutely nothing that he could do about it right now but it still bothered him tremendously. Squeezing her a little tighter, he whispered back, "Thanks."

After he untangled himself from Hermione, Harry stood up and announced, "I'm going to go to bed. I'll see everyone in the morning and we can talk about this some more then. I'm...I'm not ready to talk about this yet." Turning to face his wife, he leaned down, gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek, and said, "Do you want to stay down here for a while or are you coming up?"

Silently, Hermione stood up and laced her fingers in Harry's. She waved goodnight to the adults and they left the library together for the privacy of their room.

The adults watched them leave the room in silence, respecting Harry's wishes for postponing the discussion. None of them wanted to delve too deeply into that particular topic now anyway.

Finishing off her tea, Dora finally broke the melancholy silence that had descended upon the library when she asked, "Should we go have a little chat with Macnair or do you want to wait until tomorrow?"

"Why don't we let him worry for the evening? We can talk to him tomorrow when we're rested and he's nervous." Sirius said after looking at the tired faces of everyone.

Hermione silenced and locked their door while Harry went into the bathroom to get ready for bed. She could still feel his distress pouring through their bond and it left her at a bit of a loss. This wasn't something that she could just make go away.

Harry's prior connection to Voldemort was an insidious one that allowed Voldemort too much access to Harry's mind. This new connection would have to be explored carefully. Hermione's best guess was that Harry now had the greater degree of control. The one million-galleon question now was, 'Would Harry be able to keep

Voldemort from recognizing the connection and from getting glimpses of Harry's emotions and thoughts?'

Silently, Harry padded out of the bathroom, ran a hand tenderly across Hermione's shoulders, and climbed into bed. His thoughts were a jumble and his emotions a mess as he tried to wrap his mind around this new development. He placed his wand on the nightstand next to the bed and slipped under the covers before removing his t-shirt and tossing it on the floor.

Hermione walked out of their bathroom just as Harry dropped his shirt on the floor next to the bed. She was wearing a light pink baby doll and the matching pair of knickers that Winky must have left in the bathroom for her. Stepping into Harry's field of vision, she watched as his eyes widened comically and he gave an involuntary gulp. Smiling widely, she pirouetted to show him the entire outfit before slinking her way over to the bed.

As she climbed beneath the covers, Harry lifted his arm, and she curled up next to him while draping one of her legs across his and lay her head down on his shoulder. Leaning up, she placed a tender kiss on his cheek and said softly, "I love you and nothing is going to change that." She was gently tracing circles on his other shoulder with her free hand while she gazed into his troubled eyes.

"Thanks." Harry whispered. "It's a lot to take in all at once, you know? Are you going to be okay?" he finished with a sigh.

Hermione continued tracing patterns on Harry's chest with her fingers for a few moments before she answered in a barely audible voice, "Eventually. I know it was silly of me to never consider how destructive and dangerous magic could be, but today really made me see things differently." She paused to gather her thoughts and to regain control of her emotions before continuing softly, "I guess that I better understand some of what you have been through over the years now."

She perched herself up on his chest, looked directly into Harry's eyes, and said, "I'm sorry that I wasn't there for you after what you went

through your first three years." When she finished speaking, Hermione had tears in her eyes.

"Hey, it's okay." Harry said while tenderly wiping away one her stray tears. "You have been more help to me over the years than I can possibly begin to explain. If it weren't for your help, I don't think that I would have been able to make it through some of the things that we've done." he finished quietly while cupping Hermione's cheek in his callused hand.

Hermione clung to Harry tightly as she snuggled as close as possible to his chest. Hearing Harry's reassurances that she did help him cope made her feel a bit better about her actions from the past few years. Part of her worries were irrational, especially after witnessing first hand how he comforted her in her times of need even while he was dealing with the burdens of the Tournament.

Changing the subject, Hermione asked in a mock angry tone, "Now, when were you planning on telling me you were an Animagus?" Before he could answer her question, she lightly poked him in the ribs and said, "And why didn't you let me help?"

Squirming from her poking and her question, Harry mumbled, "I wanted it to be a surprise but then I found out that I was a snake and I was worried that it would frighten you. Then my form felt different after my encounter with the dragon but I couldn't figure out why." Reaching up, Harry ran his hand through her hair while he gathered his thoughts.

Smiling at the memory of finding out he was an Animagus, Harry said happily, "I had just finished reading the journal for the fifth or sixth time and I was thinking about my dad and Sirius when I discovered my form. I had been imagining that I was with dad, Sirius, and Remus during one of their jaunts around the grounds. The next thing that I knew, I was seeing things from a very different perspective."

Hermione noticed the wistful smile on Harry's face and she could hear the emotion in his voice as he spoke. Deciding to save her questions for later, she settled for getting comfortable and

repositioned her head on his shoulder and settled down to listen to the rest of his tale.

Harry felt Hermione shifting and gave her shoulder a light squeeze with his arm before continuing with a light chuckle in his voice, "Honestly, I discovered my form by complete accident. The hard part was changing into a snake again but with a conscious thought instead. The first transformation happened so fast that I didn't really have time to concentrate on the magic. It's also a good thing that I didn't transform in the Great Hall or in front of a bunch of people the first time."

Hermione could feel the blush on Harry's chest and she couldn't quite stifle a giggle. Curious, she asked, "What happened?" She almost laughed aloud when she felt his chest grow even warmer in embarrassment.

Giving up on controlling his blush, Harry finally blurted, "When I transformed my clothes didn't change with me. So, when I turned back, I was completely starkers."

Hermione lost it and started giggling when the image of a naked Harry looking for his clothes after his first transformation.

She felt a sudden surge of magical energy from Harry and seconds later, she was cuddling a nine-foot long Coatl instead of her blushing husband. Squashing her desire to scream, Hermione calmly reached up and rubbed the scales between his eyes and said playfully, "You know, you have the cutest shade of pink in your scales. Perhaps a nice bow and a few pictures are in order?"

There was another shudder of magic and Harry reappeared blushing and scowling at the same time. Indignantly, he quietly retorted, "I do not have pink in my scales!"

Hermione's response was a single raised eyebrow, very reminiscent of Professor Snape.

"Okay, fine." Harry huffed, "Perhaps there is a bit of pink under the right light."

She patted his chest lovingly and cooed, "Aww, you make such a cute little snake too. Would you like for me to set up a nice aquarium with a heated rock?"

"No!" Harry quickly replied, and to his shame, his voice broke like a little child.

Still chuckling slightly, Hermione snuggled closer to Harry and whispered, "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone about the pink in your scales. Let's try to get some sleep, I'm really knackered from today, and I bet that tomorrow is going to be intriguing."

Harry leaned down to kiss Hermione good night. As he pulled back, he said warmly, "I love you, good night."

"Good night and I love you too." Hermione replied as she settled into his embrace secure in the knowledge that whatever happened, they would face it together.

## Chapter 35: Breaking the bank.

For the first time in his life, Draco Malfoy wondered if he had made a mistake that his father couldn't rectify. A tiny voice in the back of his mind wondered if his father would even try to get him released but he squashed that thought almost as quickly as it appeared.

The small holding cell in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement was a spacious four by six feet and held a bunk bed, a small washbasin, and a stainless steel toilet. Every piece of furniture was magically stuck to the floor so they couldn't be used as weapons against the guards.

To make matters worse, Draco discovered that he was not alone in his cell. Currently, the man on the top bunk was snoring loudly, obviously sleeping off a drunk, and never heard the guards deposit Draco in the cramped space.

Draco had stared in absolute horror at the large lump on the bed when he realized that he was not alone in the cell. When he turned around to complain, one of the guards smirked at him and made a shushing sound while placing his finger over his lips before leaving for his station at the end of the hall.

Not liking his predicament at all, Draco quietly climbed into the bottom bunk and huddled under the blanket in the hopes that the large man wouldn't notice him if he awoke. While lying on the bed, his thoughts turned towards revenge against Potter once his father managed to free him.

White-hot fury burned in his veins and in his anger towards Potter and in his anger, he forgot about his bunkmate and slammed his fist into the mattress. The snort from the bunk above made his bowels clench in fear as he was forcibly reminded that he wasn't alone. Luckily, the large drunkard fell back asleep immediately and didn't seem to realize that Draco was there.

To afraid to sleep, Draco kept his eyes open and prayed that he would make it through the evening alive and un-violated.

Walden McNair was used to drinking and the hangovers that came afterwards. That was why it took him a few moments to realize that he wasn't at home sleeping off a bender, but in a locked cage of some type instead. To make matters worse, he also discovered that he was naked with only a thin blanket covering him.

The cage was so small that he couldn't stand up straight nor could he turn around easily. The only other thing in the cage with him was a bucket in the corner that was magically stuck to the floor that had a foul odor emanating from it.

As he took stock of his surroundings, McNair realized that he was in dire straits. He didn't think that he was being held by a Death Eater so that left Dumbledore or the Ministry. Since he knew what the Ministry holding cells looked like, he figured that it must be one of Dumbledore's Order of the Phoenix cells.

Feeling secure in the knowledge that he would be turned over to the Ministry by Dumbledore, where Lucius would have him freed quickly, McNair made himself as comfortable as possible and drifted off to sleep. In his drunken haze, he ignored the fact that Dumbledore wouldn't have treated him this poorly or he would have been a lot more worried about the identity of his captors.

Dora stepped silently into Harry and Hermione's room at six in the morning and the sight that greeted her tugged at her heart. Harry and Hermione were embracing each other in their sleep, taking comfort in each other's presence after their trying day yesterday.

Unfortunately, she was going to have to disturb their sleep in order to get Harry into the Department of Mysteries and out before anyone figured out what was going on. Gently, she shook Hermione's shoulder and whispered, "Hey, it's time to get up. I need cutie pie over there to come with me."

Bleary eyed, Hermione blinked up at Dora and rasped, "What time is it?"

Hearing voices, Harry turned his head towards the source and cracked open one eye. Seeing Dora in their bedroom, he groaned

and pulled the covers over his head while mumbling, "Too early. Go back to Remus' room, Dora."

Harry's comment caused Dora to flush a bright red as she spluttered, "I was not in Remus' room thank you very much!" While under her breath, she muttered, "Not that I wouldn't mind."

Hermione's eyes widened in surprise and Harry poked his head out from under the covers with a huge smirk on his face.

Before either of them could say anything, Dora said in a harsh whisper, "My relationship with Remus is not up for discussion!" When the only response that she received from the teens was a pair of raised eyebrows, she spluttered, "He's...I'm...We're...Oh, bugger!"

Unable to contain themselves any longer, Harry and Hermione burst out into a fit of giggles while Dora glared at them. Every time they would stop laughing, they would look up at Dora's flushed hair color and the expression on her face and start laughing again.

After the third time, Dora's patience snapped and she hit the teens with a jet of water from her wand tip.

"Dora!" Hermione shrieked as she jumped out of bed, her wet sleepwear clinging to her like a second skin.

Harry sat there like a deer in the headlights as he watched Hermione bounce up and down shaking water off her.

Seeing Harry's reaction to her wet outfit, Hermione snatched her wand from the bedside table and hit him with a jet of freezing cold water before drying herself with a casual swish of her wand.

The force of the water was so strong that it knocked Harry off the bed. He hit the floor with a 'thunk' followed quickly by a pained grunt of, "Ooh, my bum."

Dora and Hermione heard Harry's exclamation and started laughing all over again.

Their antics had drawn the attention of the rest of the house who all found themselves outside of the teen's bedroom door looking in at a laughing Dora and Hermione with Harry no where in sight.

When Harry didn't reappear from his side of the floor after a few seconds, Dora grew concerned and rounded the bed only to let out an ungodly shriek before turning tail and running from the room with a large snake snapping at her heels.

Hermione knew that Harry must have transformed in order for Dora to go running screaming from the room. A small part of her still shivered in fear at the sight of a large snake slithering across the floor but since she knew that it was Harry, she repressed that feeling and an evil smirk broke out on her face as he neared her.

Just before Harry passed her, Hermione conjured a large aquarium and levitated the snake inside before slamming the lid closed and cooing, "Aren't you just the cutest?"

The adults all broke out in laughter at the sight of Harry the snake in an aquarium. They absolutely howled when the snake looked up balefully at Hermione as if to say, "Et Tu, Hermione?"

"Oh, fine. I'll let you out but you have to be on your best behavior." Hermione said as she smiled down at Harry.

Once he was free of the cage, Harry quickly transformed back and gave Hermione a playful glare as she hugged him and whispered, "That's for staring at my bits."

Mischievously, Harry whispered in her ear, "This means war you know."

Burying her face in his neck, Hermione whispered back, "Pink scales hun."

"Grrr." Harry growled playfully as he stepped back to gaze at the audience that had gathered. Cocking his head to one side, he asked, "What are we doing this morning? I thought that Hermione and I were going to Hogwarts for our last day of the term?"

Everyone turned to Dora, her hair turned a blushing pink color from the attention before she said quickly, "I can get Harry into the Department of Mysteries this morning and then I thought that we would head over to Gringotts to empty out part of his vault afterwards."

Immediately, Hermione blurted, "Why can't I come with you too?"

Remus explained, "Because we need you to be visible at Hogwarts so people will assume that Harry is somewhere on the grounds instead of with you."

"Oh." Hermione said as she thought through Remus' statement. "Okay. I'll tell anyone that Harry is just looking around the castle before he returns to his relatives for the summer holidays." Turning to Harry, she said softly, "You'll come back to the school once you're done?"

Nodding in agreement, Harry said solemnly, "I promise." Before turning to Dora and saying, "Let me get ready and we can get going."

Harry turned around and headed for the loo while Hermione ushered everyone out of their room and closed the door. Once everyone was gone, she quickly changed into her school robes and knocked on the bathroom door. After a muffled, "Come in." from Harry, she stepped into the room to see him finishing brushing his teeth.

She walked over to him, wrapped her arms around him from behind, and buried her face into his shoulder. Softly she whispered, "Please be careful."

Harry turned around in Hermione's embrace, smiled at her, and said, "Always. Come on; let's head to the kitchen. I want to grab a quick bite before I have to go."

When the young couple entered the kitchen, they were surprised to see everyone there. Curious about the large gathering, Harry asked, "Why is everyone here? I thought that it was just going to be Dora and me going into the Department of Mysteries?"

Sirius put down his mug of coffee and said solemnly, "We're going along as backup in case things go pear shaped. If that happens, your safety is our main concern." Seeing that Harry was about to protest, he held up his hand for silence and ploughed on, "No matter what you are about to say, it is our responsibility to keep you safe even if you can take care of yourself. It's what families do."

Stupefied by Sirius' statement, Harry clamped his mouth shut and looked into everyone's faces in the kitchen. Seeing nothing but the truth of Sirius' words reflected in their gazes, he dropped his head and softly said, "Thanks."

The next fifteen minutes they spent going over the plan for where everyone would be stationed, emergency contingencies, and what disguises they would be wearing. Once everyone was comfortable with the plan, Dora stood up and said happily, "Come on, Harry. We need to disguise you too."

Not waiting for his response, Dora pulled Harry to his feet, led him into the study, and closed the door behind them. From behind the closed door there were a few muffled shouts of, "No," and "absolutely not!"

About fifteen minutes later, Dora walked into the kitchen with a huge grin on her face. When Harry didn't follow her in, she raised her finger asking for patience before poking her head back into the study and shouting, "Don't make me drag you out here! Now come on, we haven't got all day!"

Everyone heard a mumbled something about, "...rather face Voldemort than go out looking like this." before a very different looking Harry Potter stomped into the room.

Silence reigned for thirty seconds but it felt like an eternity to Harry as he stood there looking at everyone gawping at him like a fish.

Suddenly, Sirius got a huge grin on his face and Harry felt the knot in the pit of his stomach get even larger. Slowly, he circled Harry and

gave out a low appreciative whistle before saying proudly, "You did a wonderful job, Dora! No one will recognize Harry in this get up."

"That's because she turned me into a bloody girl!" shouted Harry in embarrassment. Seeing everyone snickering slightly, he blushed to the roots of his now sandy brown, shoulder length hair. Plaintively, he whined, "You really don't expect me to go out in public dressed like this do you?"

Chuckling, Remus added his two pence worth, "Actually, Harry, I think that it's the perfect disguise. Who in their right mind would even think of looking for you dressed as a girl?" The glare that Harry sent his way made him laugh a little harder so he walked up and put his arm around the embarrassed teen and said, "Smile for the camera, Harry."

"What?" Harry blurted in alarm just as the flash went off on the camera that Sirius was pointing at them.

Before Harry could say or do anything about the camera, Sirius passed it to Annabelle for safekeeping. Temporarily defeated, Harry glowered at Sirius and Remus before turning his attention to Hermione. He found her gazing at him pensively. After a few moments beneath her gaze, Harry began to fidget.

Hermione was looking over Harry's disguise carefully. She found that he made a attractive girl and that made her blush just a tiny bit while she inspected him. With a twirling motion of her fingers to him, he pirouetted on the spot slowly allowing her to see him from behind.

Not sensing anything but reassurance from the bond, Harry did as Hermione requested and pirouetted so she could see his entire disguise.

Slowly, Hermione stepped up to Harry, hugged him tightly, and whispered into his ear, "It's a perfect disguise, Harry. No one will recognize you at all. I think you look great but don't get too used to wearing my clothes."

When they parted, Harry was blushing furiously and Hermione was sporting a small smile with a hint of color on her cheeks. Bolstered by Hermione's support, Harry turned to the adults and said in a falsetto voice while flipping his hair over his shoulder, "Shall we be going? I need to have my hair done this afternoon and I don't want to be late."

Hermione cracked up at Harry's imitation of a female Draco Malfoy while the adults were highly amused.

"Okay, now that you lot are all done laughing at me, let's get going. The sooner we get this over with, the sooner I can get back into my own clothes." Harry opined while making his way towards the front door.

Harry and Dora were the last ones to leave the house while they waited for everyone to get into position. Everyone had disguised themselves in some fashion except for Andromeda. She was usually seen in the Alley during the mornings so it wasn't unusual.

Dora apparated them to the alley just outside the Leaky Cauldron and they made their way inside. She noticed Harry fidgeting and hissed quietly, "Stop fussing. You look fine."

Harry's only response was to glare at her but he did relax a bit. His feet were a touch sore from the low-heeled shoe and he felt a little exposed even though he knew that everything was covered by the dress and robes. Plastering on a vapid smile, he pretended to inspect his nails like he had seen Lavender and Parvati do hundreds of times.

"Come on, sweetie. We don't want to be late for our appointment." Dora said with a light laugh in her voice as she watched Harry put on a show. She was definitely going to show this memory to everyone using a Pensieve. Especially, the memory of the two old guys in the corner leering at the Boy-In-Drag.

Harry and Dora stepped out into Diagon Alley and discretely checked to see if everyone was in place. Spotting everyone, they began heading up towards Gringotts. It had been decided that going to the bank first was the better course of action. The change in plans would

allow them to beat the lunchtime traffic at the bank and to enter the Ministry while everyone else was hurrying off to eat.

It was Harry's first time back to the bank since before his first year and even though he was in disguise, he was eager to visit his vault again. What he hadn't expected was the reception that they received.

The Goblins had seemed so polite to him during his first trip there. Looking back, it could have been because he was a child but he wasn't quite sure. The teller was sneering down at them in contempt as they approached the counter. With a surprisingly high-pitched voice, the goblin growled, "What do you want?"

Unnoticed by either Harry or Dora, the goblin had pressed a button beneath his desk that started recording everything said or done at his station. The goblins were in the business of making money and information was worth more than its weight in gold.

Harry stepped forward, placed his key on the counter, and said calmly, but quietly, in his disguised voice, "I would like to visit my vault."

The goblin inspected the key for a moment then looked back up at the two humans in front of him. The key was genuine and that meant that the young woman in disguise was probably Harry Potter. With a feral grin, the goblin quietly purred, "Right this way, Ms. Potter."

Harry and Dora barely managed to contain their shock at being discovered so easily. In response, each of them covertly palmed their wands as they followed the goblin down to the cart.

Dora was going through their options while they sped towards Harry's vault. Originally, the plan was to leave a few pieces of gold in the bank like Sirius had done earlier. Now, she knew that they were too exposed so they were going to take everything. Her biggest worry was what to do about the nasty little blighter driving the cart.

When they reached Harry's vault, the goblin snapped, "Key." and held out a clawed hand expectantly.

Before Harry could hand the key to the small creature, Dora stopped him with a touch, took the key from him, and then handed it to the goblin. Something was bothering her and the longer they were down here the worse that feeling was becoming. Returning the goblin's sneer, Dora snapped waspishly, "Wait outside, we will be done in a moment."

Without waiting for an answer, she swept Harry past the disgruntled goblin and pulled the door partially closed behind them. Quietly, she whispered, "Take it all, something is not right here. I'll watch the door."

Harry didn't argue with her assessment, he was feeling decidedly uneasy as well. The shoulder bag that he was carrying was actually an enchanted bag that would easily hold the contents of his vault. He opened the bag and set it on the floor before beginning to levitate the piles of gold into it.

While Harry was working, Dora had discreetly warded the door to prevent the goblin from eavesdropping. Once she was sure that the Goblin couldn't hear what was going on, she whispered, "How much longer?" while never taking her eyes off their minder.

"Almost done." Harry whispered back as he frantically transferred the last pile of gold into his bag. A tense minute later, he stepped over to Dora and said, "Finished. What are you going to do about him?" he indicated the goblin outside with a flick of his finger.

Thinking frantically about what to do, the strain was evident in Dora's voice as she spoke, "I'm either going to Oblivate him or put him under the Imperious Curse."

Having been on the receiving end of one and experiencing a near miss with the other, Harry nodded his head in acceptance before asking, "Do you need me to distract him?"

"That would be the easiest thing. Move so you have him between us before you talk to him. I'll strike the moment he turns his attention to you." Dora whispered grimly.

She cancelled the charm on the door and Harry walked out to distract their escort.

Putting the goblin between them, Harry cleared his throat, and said in his normal voice, "Excuse me. How did you know who I was?"

The moment the goblin focused his attention solely on Harry Dora struck. Her wand stabbed out as she muttered, "Imperio." The goblin's face went slack as the curse took hold. Formulating a plan of attack, she stepped into the goblin's line of sight and whispered, "Act like nothing is out of the ordinary. Return us to the surface then return to your post and perform your duties normally for the next fifteen minutes. At that point, you will take a break and head towards Knockturn Alley and wait for me."

Obediently, the goblin climbed into the cart and once they were all seated, he took them back up to the surface.

Harry and Dora didn't say a word for the rest of their time in Gringotts. Once they were outside, she flashed the trouble signal and began heading for the rendezvous point with her mum so she could get Harry out safely.

Ted was closest to the entrance of Knockturn Alley and it was his job to deal with any tails that followed Dora and Harry from the bank if necessary. Not seeing anyone following them out, he disillusioned himself and stepped into the shadows to wait.

He didn't have to wait long, a goblin came trotting out of the bank and was heading straight for his position. Instinctively, he knew that the goblin was the tail and he would have to capture the beast. As he was readying himself for a fight, he was shocked when the goblin stepped into the entryway and just stopped like he was waiting for someone.

Looking around to make sure no one was looking; Ted silently stunned, bound, and disillusioned the goblin before making his way towards the Apparition Point with his prisoner.

Goyle, Sr. was heading up from Borgin and Burkes when he saw the telltale red flash from a stunner. Spell fire was nothing new in Knockturn Alley but when the victim disappeared before his eyes and he couldn't see the attacker, he knew something was out of the ordinary.

Since he was unable to see who was stunned or who had done the stunning, he hastily set a minor Trespassing Ward across the section of the street to alert him when his invisible mystery person was walking by. Fifteen seconds later, something tripped his ward. Goyle, Sr. immediately sprayed a jet of water from his wand across the width of the alley to locate the invisible people.

Ted was so focused on escaping with his prisoner that he didn't notice the ward until it was too late. The moment he felt the spray of water hit him; he dropped the bound goblin and rolled away from the jet of water.

Goyle saw one shape fall to the ground in front of him and not move. He was momentarily shocked when a trussed up goblin appeared in front of him. He knew that the goblins sold information to Malfoy on a regular basis so it was a good bet that whoever had captured the goblin was part of Dumbledore's Order.

Not wanting to suffer the punishment if he let the goblin fall into the wrong hands, Goyle aimed his wand at the still unconscious creature and snarled, "Reducto." The upper portion of the goblin was decimated in a shower of blood that soaked the cobblestone street and the steps to a couple of nearby shops.

Ted stared in mute shock at the goblins remains before more spell fire flashed, causing him to flatten himself even further into the street.

Goyle, Sr. never saw the spell that rendered him unconscious as he fell to the ground in a boneless heap.

"Give me a hand will you?" Remus grunted to Ted as he hoisted Goyle's dead weight up.

Ted complied immediately and they half carried, half dragged, the unconscious Death Eater towards the Apparition Point as fast as they could. The moment they reached the spot, they turned and vanished with their prisoner leaving the dead goblin behind.

Andromeda and Sirius whisked Harry out of Diagon Alley and into muggle London while Dora doubled back towards Knockturn Alley to make sure that her father seized their quarry and escaped safely.

When she arrived in Knockturn Alley, Dora found a crowd milling about a dead goblin. She whipped out her Auror Badge and yelled, "Everyone back away from the body!" When people didn't move fast enough for her liking, she barked, "Now!"

Once everyone was far enough away, she pressed the tip of her wand to her badge to send an alert to the Auror office that she needed assistance. While she waited for back up to arrive, Dora began checking for other signs of blood or a struggle.

She was relieved when she didn't find anything that indicated that her father or Remus had been injured. Her fears temporary allayed, she began interviewing the denizens of Knockturn Alley for anyone that might have witnessed the altercation. Unsurprisingly, she didn't find anyone willing to admit to seeing what happened even though she knew that at least a half a dozen people had to have seen something.

Her back up arrived fifteen minutes later, unfortunately it was in the form of two known Fudge flunkies. Aurors Dawlish and Stevens took stock of the scene and then walked over to Auror Tonks.

Just as Dora was about to go over her findings, Dawlish snapped, "You had us come down here for a dead goblin? I've got better things to be doing than checking into the death of every non-human species that you see fit to associate with."

"You moron!" Dora snapped back before continuing in a more professional tone, "That goblin was killed by a wizard. Don't you think that should be cause for concern?"

Dawlish was getting a little hot under the collar and his cheeks were flushed in his anger over being called out publicly. Dismissively, he said, "One less goblin doesn't mean a thing and you don't have any witnesses or suspects that say otherwise, do you?"

Her less than professional reply was mumbled so quietly that it was lost on the wind. Gathering her composure, Dora said, "Well, since you feel justice has been served, I'll let you handle the scene while I tell the Director the bad news." Without waiting for a reply, she stalked off towards the Ministry to make her report.

Arriving at the Ministry, Dora headed down to the Law Enforcement offices to give her report to Amelia. Hopefully, her superior would understand the deeper ramifications of what had led to the goblin's murder.

Knocking on Amelia's door, Dora waited until she was ushered in and the Security Charms were cast before getting down to the details.

"We have a problem with Gringotts, ma'am." Seeing her superior's curious expression, she quickly continued, "I took someone to Gringotts today under disguise and they recognized the person immediately."

"We always suspected that they were able to identify clients in their bank. Why is this a problem?" Amelia asked politely.

Dora peered over at her superior before deciding that it was honest curiosity and not disinterest before replying evenly, "Because someone just killed the goblin that I was about to interrogate in Knockturn Alley."

Amelia reached up, removed her monocle, and pinched the bridge of her nose in frustration. Tiredly, she said, "The last thing that we need is open warfare with the goblins. Too many people have all of their family's gold, heirlooms, and important papers in one of their vaults."

Giving the younger woman sitting across from her a measuring stare, she asked pointedly, "Who were you escorting to the bank this morning and why?"

Stalling for time, Dora said, "We were removing large amounts of gold in case Gringotts fell or they sided with Voldemort."

"Stop stalling, Auror Tonks, and answer the rest of the question." Amelia ordered in her no nonsense voice.

Stuck between a rock and a hard place, Dora did the only thing that she could think of and asked, "Would you promise to not tell anyone who I was with today? The ramifications would be a major blow to our plans if it got out and would probably drive the goblins into Voldemort's camp."

Amelia studied the young auror for a moment as the silence stretched on into the realm of uncomfortable. After a few more moments, she said, "I promise that I won't tell a soul about who you were escorting to Gringotts today."

"Harry Potter." Dora said as she dropped the proverbial bomb on Amelia.

Letting out a low whistle of air, Amelia leaned back in her chair and looked at the ceiling while she thought about Dora's statement.

She knew that there would be a mass panic if it were publicly known that Harry Potter was removing large amounts of gold from Gringotts because he didn't trust the goblins.

Then it all seemed to click together in her mind as she thought over what Auror Tonk's relationship was with Harry Potter. "You're mother is a Black isn't she?" Not waiting for an answer, Amelia ploughed on, "Your parents were recently registered as Harry Potter's guardians, and Albus Dumbledore doesn't know about the change yet."

"Yes, ma'am. That's correct. Sirius adopted him recently, so he is now technically a Black. We didn't want to leave any legal loopholes that could end up with Harry being placed somewhere that wasn't safe." Dora said gravely as she considered the ramifications of Dumbledore or worse, Malfoy, getting their hooks into Harry's guardianship.

"What happened to Harry's muggle relatives?" Amelia asked shrewdly.

Smiling in appreciation for the Dursley's suffering, Dora proudly said, "They signed over guardianship immediately once they were told about being watched by witches and wizards all of the time. We moved them to Australia where they unfortunately ran afoul of the local police. The last I heard was that Vernon Dursley was doing some time in jail and had lost his job. Petunia was looking for work and their whale of a son was forced to attend the local public school."

"And who are Harry's muggle guardians now? The Grangers?" Amelia queried perceptibly.

"Please keep that quiet. We don't want that getting out and putting them in more danger than they are already in." Tonks pleaded.

Amelia nodded in agreement but she wasn't fooled. She knew that Hermione's parents were under heavy protection. "I will need to speak to Mr. Potter about what happened at Hogwarts yesterday. He isn't in trouble but we are going to need his testimony to secure our case against Draco Malfoy."

"I'll see what I can arrange and get back to you, ma'am." said Dora honestly.

"Thank you, Auror Tonks. Please keep me posted on the goblin issue. As of right now that is your primary case and you are to only report to me." Amelia said with a hint of dismissal in her tone.

As she stood up, Dora said, "Yes, ma'am. I'll keep you informed if anything develops." Without a backwards glance, she headed out of the Ministry intent upon heading back to headquarters immediately to find out what happened in Knockturn Alley."

Andromeda, Sirius, and Harry arrived back at the Granger's house about thirty minutes after they left Diagon Alley. They had hopped in a cab and had the driver take them on a tour of London to lose any pursuers before apparating back to the house.

The moment they were in the kitchen, Harry turned to his two escorts and said worriedly, "What happened?"

"We don't know yet." Andromeda said worriedly as she slumped down into one of the kitchen chairs.

Sirius answered Harry's unspoken question, his voice grave, "I'm not sure, Harry. I saw Moony moving towards the entrance to Knockturn Alley right after the goblin went in. That's all we know at this point until we visit headquarters and chat with everyone else."

When neither adult seemed to be getting up, Harry prompted, "Well? Why don't you head over there and find out?"

Silently, Sirius stood, patted Harry on the shoulder as he walked by, and said softly, "I'm just glad you are alright. Please get one of the elves to take you back to Hogwarts while we head over to headquarters and find out what happened."

Harry nodded in agreement and as he stood up, Andromeda hugged him and said softly, "Take care, Harry."

Winky was already in the room and before he could call out, she said, "I can take you back to school, Master Harry."

"Thank you, Winky. Let me go get changed and then we can go." Harry said as he watched his adoptive father and his, for lack of a better term Aunt, leave the house.

Once he was ready, Winky shifted them from the house to the kitchens in Hogwarts. Seeing Dobby carrying a tray of hot rolls, Harry snagged one and said, "Thank you both for everything. I'll see you in a few hours."

Harry paused just inside the kitchen and tuned everything else out except for his connection to Hermione. After a few seconds, a smile broke out on his face when he realized where she was on the grounds. With a wave goodbye to his elves, he headed out towards their garden down by the great lake.

While Harry was heading down to meet up with Hermione, Ted and Remus were busy making Goyle, Sr. comfortable in his new cell.

After removing Goyle, Sr.'s clothing, they covered him in a thin blanket and stuck him in another one of the cages. Their task done, Remus stood up and transfigured a wall to separate the two cells and placed Silencing Spells up to prevent the two prisoners from seeing or talking with each other.

"Do you want to wake him up?" Ted asked Remus while he looked at the unconscious man in the cage.

Rubbing his chin in thought, Remus said, "I do, but we should wait until Dora gets here and then dose him with Veritaserum first. I want answers about why he murdered that goblin."

Ted grunted in agreement and moved towards the door to the basement to fetch the truth potion from the pantry.

Dora rushed into the kitchen of Number 12 and spotted her dad coming out of the pantry with a bottle in his hands. Relief flooded through her and she flung herself into his arms and exclaimed, "Thank goodness that you are all right. I was worried when we found the dead goblin."

"There, there, Dora. Everything turned out fine." Ted soothed his daughter as he rubbed her back. When they separated, he told her, "Remus stunned my attacker, it was Goyle, Sr., and we have him in another cell downstairs." while he shook the small vial of Veritaserum in front of her.

Dora gave a half-hearted smile, beckoned towards the basement door, and said, "Shall we then?"

Remus looked up when he saw Ted return followed by Dora. He had been trying to figure out why Goyle would kill a goblin and all signs pointed to nothing good at all. "Ready?" he asked his two companions as he opened the cell, levitated the large man into a chair, and bound him magically.

Ted stepped up to the unconscious man and administered the three drops of Veritaserum. Once he was sure that the potion had taken effect, he waved his wand and woke Goyle up.

Not wanting Goyle to get his bearings or see his interrogators, Dora shone a bright light into his eyes from her wand tip. She had been reading up on techniques used in the muggle world to disorient people under questioning and knew that the light would help.

Goyle blinked stupidly at the bright light when he awoke. He couldn't remember how he got here but he instinctively knew that it wasn't a good thing. Unfortunately, the potions induced haze was keeping him from thinking too hard or he would have been more concerned with his situation. As it was, he made a feeble attempt to move before realizing that he was bound to the chair.

"Why did you kill that goblin?" Remus asked in a calm voice while adding his own light into the mix when he saw the confusion on Goyle's face.

Sweat was breaking out on Goyle's brow as he desperately tried not to answer the question. However, the potions grasp was too strong and he slurred, "The Dark Lord has been paying the goblins for years for information on all major account holders and anyone he deems a person of interest."

Remus nodded in acceptance, it was as bad, or worse, as he feared. Who knows what kind of information the goblins had sold over the years that had been put to use by the Death Eaters that escaped justice after Voldemort's fall from power.

Ted and Dora both let out low whistles as the Death Eater confirmed a horrible plot against the majority of the Wizarding world.

The next question and answer made them all just a bit more paranoid, "What were you doing in the Alley?" Dora asked once she had recovered from the earlier revelation.

Goyle turned his head towards the feminine voice but all he got for his troubles was a bright light shone in his face as he answered tonelessly, "We were looking for Sirius Black and Harry Potter so we could capture them and take them to our Lord."

"Bugger." Dora swore softly before asking a follow up question, "Do you know which disguise he wore to Gringotts?"

"Yes." Goyle said as his head lolled to the side while a small rivulet of drool ran down his chin.

The bright red flash of a stunner from Remus' wand hit Goyle right in the forehead causing the large man to rock backwards tipping his chair over with a resounding crash. "We need to tell Dumbledore about this bit of news." Remus said somberly while he levitated the Death Eater back into his cell.

"I agree." Ted rumbled in his deep voice while his daughter nodded in silent agreement.

Looking at his two friends, Remus said wearily, "Don't hold any meals for me. I'm sure that Dumbledore is going to play his usual games."

Dora patted Remus on the small of his back as he headed out to complete his unwelcome task with a wistful look on her face.

"You like him don't you?" Ted asked his daughter softly.

"I do." was her simple reply.

Ted nodded once, turned to his daughter, and said, "He's a good man with a lot of baggage." When Dora turned to look at her father, he smiled back at her and said warmly, "Just so you know, we approve."

He walked out of the basement with a spring in his step and a light smile gracing his lips as his daughter stood there blushing like a tomato. It was the little moments in life that were so special sometimes and he was glad to have shared one with his daughter. Every little bit of happiness helped with the dark times looming.

## Chapter 36: Deadly Games.

Hermione had been walking towards the library when she felt Harry's nervousness explode through their bond. It was enough of a distraction that she realized she wouldn't be getting any worthwhile studying done. Altering her course, she headed out onto the grounds for the one place that she knew there would be solitude, their garden.

By the time she settled into one of the cushioned stone benches, Harry was no longer flooding the bond with nervous energy, instead it had shifted to concerned anxiousness. Deciding to settle in for a while, she tucked her legs beneath her and pulled out one of her guilty pleasures, trashy romance novels. It was a secret obsession that she shared with her mum, much to her father's amusement.

Her favorite genre centered on romances taking place in the Victorian Era. It was highly amusing to her that she dwelled part time in a world that was still living somewhat in that era. The troubling thing was; the Wizarding World was nothing like the real world at all. The insular magical society had effectively stagnated due to its own longevity.

The average life span for Witches and Wizards was so long that the people in power felt very uncomfortable around the modern non-magical world. Hermione doubted that some of them had even left the Wizarding World in their lifetime and willingly spent time around the 'muggles'.

Oh, sure, there were a few exceptions to the general rule, the knight bus, and the enchanted cars that the Ministry employed from time to time, but the average citizen didn't even understand the basics about non-magical life and technology.

Some families attempted to change with the ever-evolving times but they often fell short of abandoning the outdated ways of thinking because so much of their lives were intertwined with the same establishment that refused to change. The Weasley's were a good example of a family that had made some attempts to evolve with the times. As a result, the majority of the purebloods in power shunned them as blood traitors.

Shaking herself from her reverie, Hermione turned her attention back to her book and let out a sigh. Her mind's wanderings left a bad taste in her mouth, and with a snap, she closed the book and stuffed it into her bag. What good was a book if she couldn't lose herself within its pages?

Gazing into the ever-burning fire, she focused on feeling Harry through the bond. Realizing that he was actually on the grounds sooner than anticipated made her worry that something had gone wrong during the planned outings.

Moments later, Harry strode into the clearing and sat down heavily next to her with a sigh. Silently, he reached over and grasped her hand for support.

Hermione noticed that Harry was shaking slightly with nervous energy so she squeezed his hand tightly and snuggled into his side. A few seconds later, she quietly asked, "Do you want to talk about it yet?"

She knew it had something to do with his visit to Diagon Alley.

Tentatively, she asked, "Is everyone alright?"

Before he answered, Harry stretched out his senses for any listening charms. Finding none, he relaxed a bit and said in a soft voice, "I don't know." Rubbing his hand over his face in frustration, he continued worriedly, "It all happened so fast. The Goblins knew that it was me despite my disguise. Dora and I were both worried so she had me empty my vault and then she put the goblin under the Imperious Curse and told him to follow us out into the Alley after we left."

Hermione gasped at the mention of the Unforgivable Curse but otherwise kept silent as Harry continued his recounting of events.

Up in his office, Headmaster Albus Dumbledore was listening in with rapt attention. The second time that Harry discovered his eavesdropping charms, he began thinking up a way to avoid detection. Through some trial and error, Dumbledore came up with a

charm that would remain passive except when someone was speaking.

It was a magnificent piece of charm work that had taken him a few weeks to figure out, but now it was paying handsome dividends. Unfortunately, the information that he was receiving was disturbing on many fronts.

First of all, Harry was off the grounds, again, traipsing around with witches in Diagon Alley during a school day. Even more troubling was the fact that Dumbledore didn't know much about the witch, Dora.

The more pressing issue was that Harry had removed his gold from Gringotts. The panic that would ensue if that fact were discovered could lead to another Goblin Rebellion if everyone began removing their gold and closing their accounts.

Dumbledore was so caught up in his thoughts that he missed some of what Harry was saying. Cursing his lapse of attention, he turned his focus back to his wayward charge's voice.

"After that, I came straight out here to see you." Harry finished recounting his morning to Hermione.

"I'm glad you're safe, Harry. I'm sure that they will let us know that everyone is okay as soon as possible." Hermione reassured him.

Frustrated, Harry sighed, "I know. I just wish we didn't have to wait to find out what's going on."

Hermione patted his knee in support, gave him a peck on the cheek, and hauled him unceremoniously to his feet with a smile, "Come on, we still have time to check out the library before lunch!"

Shaking his head ruefully at Hermione's antics, Harry smiled back, waved his hand in a sweeping gesture, and said, "Lead on, MacDuff."

~AQ~

As the two Gryffindor teens left the garden, Albus Dumbledore leaned back into his chair and clasped his fingers in front of his mouth in thought. His ruminations were cut short when one of the portraits spoke up.

"Excuse me, Headmaster. Remus Lupin is at the base of the gargoyle trying to guess the password." Said the portrait of Armando Dippet.

"Thank you, Armando." Dumbledore said pleasantly while waving his wand to allow Remus entry.

A few moments later, Remus Lupin entered the Headmaster's Office and sat down in the offered chair. Politely declining the offer of refreshments, he said calmly, "Albus, we have a bit of a situation."

Interested, Albus leaned forward slightly and warmly said, "Well then, a problem shared is a problem halved. What can I help you with today, Remus?"

"The Goblins have been selling information on the people that enter their bank to Voldemort. Well, more specifically Lucius Malfoy." Remus answered gravely.

"And how did you come by this information?" Dumbledore asked while his blue eyes bored into Lupin's amber ones demanding an answer.

Shaking his head slightly, Remus threw up his Occlumency Shields and replied, "If I don't tell you, you can't get into trouble if that information comes out somehow." It felt good to turn the Headmaster's games against him for once and he smiled inwardly when he saw Dumbledore's momentary look of disappointment.

"I understand." Albus said softly while continuing to stare into Remus' amber eyes. "Does this information have anything to do with Harry being off the grounds last night and this morning?"

Stone faced, Remus replied immediately, "I don't know what you're talking about, sir. I've been busy trying to make ends meet since

losing my job again." Holding up his hand to forestall an offer of aid, he continued, "I'm getting by and will be just fine. Thank you for your concern."

Lupin's response confirmed that he was involved in getting Harry to Diagon Alley but he realized that nothing good would come if he pushed the issue. Returning to the original discussion, Dumbledore asked, "How long have the Goblins been selling sensitive information to Lucius?"

"Years." Remus replied somberly. The weight of the implication was enough to render further explanation unnecessary.

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and contemplated how this new revelation was going to change his plans for the upcoming war. "I think we need to inform everyone and have a meeting of the Order of the Phoenix tonight."

Remus nodded in agreement. He knew this was coming and having extra manpower in the fight against Voldemort would make a huge difference in the long run. "When and where should I tell people to meet?"

"I think eight pm in my office would be the best place for now. The students will be heading home this afternoon so the castle will be empty." Dumbledore replied absent mindedly, his thoughts already focusing on what parts of his plan he needed to change.

He was so lost in his thoughts that he almost missed Remus excuse himself. Just before Lupin made it to the door, Albus said softly, "Don't bring Sirius. I haven't had the time to convince everyone else that he isn't guilty yet."

Remus stiffened for a moment in anger before continuing on his way. He would let Sirius know over lunch that he was still not trusted by Dumbledore or The Order.

~AQ~

After a quick stop in the library, Harry and Hermione were seated at the Gryffindor Table in the Great Hall enjoying their last meal of the year in the castle.

Neville was chatting with Ginny about getting together over summer vacation when there was a great whooshing sound followed by hundreds of owls swooping into the Great Hall carrying the Daily Prophet.

"That's odd." Ginny said as the delivery owl plopped down in front of Hermione and held out its leg. "The paper is really late today. I wonder why?"

With practiced ease, Hermione removed the newspaper and placed a knut in the payment pouch. Before the owl was even out of the Great Hall, she sprayed tea all over Neville in her shock.

"What the...?" Neville blurted as he frantically wiped the tea from his face.

Hermione however, was not paying the slightest attention to Neville; her eyes were fixed on the moving photograph on the front page of the Daily Prophet. It was a picture of the Great Hall with injured students scattered near the destroyed Slytherin Table, the headline read, "Attempted Murder at Hogwarts!"

The bottom of the page had a second photo with the headline, "Boy-Who-Lived saves student!" It was a picture of Harry sitting on the floor screaming for help with Tracey Davis in his arms.

After quickly skimming the article, Hermione let out a sigh of relief. Harry's roll in the entire affair was portrayed in a good light. Draco Malfoy and Albus Dumbledore didn't get off so lightly. The article went on at length about Malfoy's cowardly attack and Dumbledore's lack of safety measures to prevent something so tragic from happening in the first place.

Personally, Hermione was amazed that stuff like this didn't happen more often with so many hormonal, armed, teenagers in such close proximity all of the time.

Harry had taken one look at the photographs and the headlines on the paper before turning his attention to the rest of the students. The Slytherins weren't sending him hostile glares so he turned his attention to the Head Table where Dumbledore was sitting. The Headmaster was sitting ramrod straight but that was the only indication that anything was out of the ordinary.

Realizing that he wasn't going to learn anything else from watching the teachers, Harry turned back to Hermione and asked, "How bad is it?"

She set the paper down and whispered, "You're portrayed more as the heroic victim in the article. However, Malfoy and Dumbledore are taking some serious heat for their roles in everything." Sliding the paper over to him, she said, "Here, see for yourself."

As Harry read through the article, his feelings of unease grew. Rita's column had some very disturbing information in it. Information that no one but the people present could possibly know and he was pretty sure that Professor Snape and Madam Pomfrey were not talking to any members of the press.

Grim faced, he put the article down and whispered into Hermione's ear, "We have a problem. There is stuff in this article that no one should know about except for me, Professor Snape, and Madam Pomfrey. Did you see Rita Skeeter in the Great Hall yesterday?"

Hermione pursed her lips in thought as she ran the events from yesterday through her mind. Finally, she said slowly, "No. I don't recall seeing her at all. What do you think that means?"

Leaning back in, Harry whispered, "It means that she's found a way to listen in on private conversations without being detected. It's not a spell that I have sensed either. That rules out invisibility and the only thing left that I can think of is that she could be an unregistered Animagus."

Turning to face him properly, Hermione cocked her head to the side slightly as she stared into Harry's luminescent green eyes. They

shone brightly, similar to Dumbledore's, and then she realized it for what it really was; power. Slowly, she closed her eyes and stretched out her senses like Harry had been teaching her to do over the course of the year.

It took a moment before she could sort out the sensations but when she did, she realized something important had changed. Her eyes snapped open and she found Harry's concerned face inches from hers. She gave him a reassuring peck on the lips before leaning in to hug him tightly. While she hugged him, she whispered, "Your magic really feels different to me. It changed more than you admitted earlier, didn't it?"

Shocked, Harry nodded into her embrace and whispered back, "Yes. It's much stronger now, unchained, I guess. I'm still learning about all of the changes though. Why do you ask?"

Hermione pulled back from the hug and saw Neville and Ginny looking at them in concern. Smiling at their friends shyly, she said, "We're okay. Something just occurred to me and Harry calmed me down."

"Okay?" Neville replied, clearly not understanding what had just transpired in front of him but willing to let it go for now.

Ginny was staring at the two of them intently. She knew that something had happened but didn't know what. Figuring they would tell her eventually, she shrugged her shoulders in acceptance and turned her attention to the discarded Daily Prophet on the table in front of them. Picking it up, she asked, "Do you mind if I read this?"

With an absent minded wave of her hand, Hermione said, "Sure, help yourself."

Up at the Head Table, Dumbledore was silently fuming. Rita Skeeter was fast becoming an even larger nuisance. In all the bedlam following Malfoy's errant spell he hadn't thought to check for Rita in her beetle form. Now he was paying for his short sightedness and it didn't please him one bit.

He put down the Daily Prophet and scanned the hall over the rim of his half moon spectacles. The Slytherins were huddled together in small packs whispering over the article while the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs looked unbothered by the paper. The Gryffindors appeared split on the matter, probably due to Harry Potter's involvement, but overall, they weren't really bothered by the repercussions of Draco Malfoy's errant spell.

'When had the school become so divided?' Dumbledore thought to himself as he continued to survey the student body. It was something that he felt he needed to improve in the upcoming year, especially with Voldemort back in the picture. No sense driving a large portion into the arms of an enemy if it can be avoided.

With a sigh, Dumbledore wiped his mouth and placed his napkin the plate in front of him before getting up from his seat and leaving the Great Hall through the side door.

~AQ~

Long, thin, pale fingers drummed angrily on the tabletop as he thought about the frightened man sitting across from him. Ollivander had just given him a very disturbing piece of news and he wasn't sure what to do about it yet. Finally, he hissed, "Does Harry Potter know that our wands share the same core?"

"Y...yes, he does." Replied Ollivander nervously, his eyes never leaving the wand twirling between its master's fingers.

"What will happen if our wands meet in battle?" Voldemort asked in a low voice.

Ollivander stammered, "They...they will not work properly against one another."

"Explain." Voldemort hissed menacingly, his eyes boring into Ollivander's.

Wincing at the Dark Lord's tone of voice, Ollivander whispered nervously, "The wand cores will recognize each other as coming from

the same Phoenix and probably won't work against each other properly." When Voldemort narrowed his eyes, he rushed on, "It's just a guess, but you may be able to force one of the wands to overpower the other. The result would probably be that whichever wand was victorious would become the dominant of the pair."

Voldemort couldn't detect any deceit in the wand maker's voice so he leaned back in his chair and continued to drum his fingers on the table while he thought things over. After a few moments, he hissed softly, "You are going to either make me a new wand or find me another amongst your collection."

Ollivander was about to say that a Wizard couldn't have a second wand when the look in the Dark Lord's eyes brought him up short. Meekly, he whispered, "Of course. Shall we begin searching for another wand for you now?"

His wand pointed at Ollivander, Voldemort said softly, "Yes, we shall. However, one false move and the world will have one less wand maker in it. Understood?"

Gulping, Ollivander nodded his head in understanding and slowly got up from his chair and began pulling down boxes full of wands with various cores made from yew. Fifty wands later, he found a wand that worked.

The moment Voldemort grasped the smooth ivory colored wand; he knew that it was the right one. A strong gust of wind tugged at his robes and blew all of the papers off the counter by the till while silver and green sparks danced from the tip.

Reverently, Voldemort asked, "What type of core?" While running his fingers down the shaft of the wand.

His nervousness momentarily forgotten, Ollivander said happily, "That wand is made of yew, ten inches, with a Chimera heartstring core."

"Excellent." Hissed Voldemort as he twirled the wand through his fingers. The wand was perfectly smooth and the handle was carved in the shape of the Chimera that the core came from.

Quick as a striking snake, Voldemort pointed his new wand at Ollivander and hissed, "Avada Kedavra!"

The bright green flash of the Killing Curse filled the room, illuminating Ollivander's pale face with its deathly glow before it struck him down in the middle of his shop.

Once he was finished collecting all of the wands and the raw materials for making more, Voldemort stepped up to Ollivander's corpse and began chanting a spell in an obscure language.

When he was finished with the curse, he stepped over to the door and set the rest of the trap. With a wave of his wand, Voldemort took down his Anti-Transport Wards and Notice-Me-Not Charms before disappearing with a small pop of displaced air.

~AQ~

Shortly after Auror Tonks left her office, Amelia Bones began making contingency plans for the safety of her family. Susan's welfare was her first priority and her first step in ensuring that would be to set up a secure place to live.

With that in mind, she told her assistant that she was heading out, but not why, and headed for Gringotts. Arriving at the bank, she made her way down to her vault and removed what little gold she had saved over the years.

By the time that she exited the building the sun was peaking through the clouds bathing the steps of the bank in a warm glow. As she turned the corner to head back towards the Ministry, she thought she saw the telltale flash of spell-fire out of the corner of her eye.

Drawing her wand, she turned to face the row of buildings where she thought the spell originated. The most likely place for spell fire was from Ollivanders. Normally, she would have dismissed the thought of

trouble from her mind immediately. However, with the knowledge that Voldemort was back and the lack of people in the street, she proceeded towards the wand maker's shop cautiously.

The hairs on the back of her neck were standing on end and the closer she got to the shop the more things felt wrong. Making a snap decision, Amelia tapped her wand to her badge and summoned back up while inching closer to the building across the street so she could get a look inside the shop window.

Ten very tense minutes later, her backup began arriving in the Alley. Unfortunately, they were completely oblivious to the need for a stealthy approach. A few were even gathering right in front of Ollivander's shop! Realizing that her aurors were wholly unprepared for the upcoming conflict, she sighed and made a mental note to increase their training regimen.

Stepping into the street, Amelia summoned her Aurors over to her and began outlining the situation, "There was a flash of spell fire from Ollivander's about ten minutes ago and no one has gone in or come out of the shop since."

"But there's always spell fire in there." Blurted Auror Dawlish as he and Stevens joined the group.

Fighting the urge to snap at the boorish auror, Amelia elaborated, "Ollivander's is usually empty at this time of day. Especially since the students are still at Hogwarts. It may be nothing, but we need to be sure that Mr. Ollivander is safe."

Tired of the mutterings from her subordinates, she barked, "Dawlish, take Stevens with you and check out the shop. If there's trouble, tap your badge."

Grumbling under his breath, Dawlish motioned for Stevens to join him and they trooped over to the wand maker's shop. Without even checking the interior, Dawlish yanked open the door and they stepped inside.

Amelia was pinching the bridge of her nose while shaking her head in disgust as she watched two of her aurors walk blindly into the building. Her younger aurors had no real concept of how dangerous the times were during the last war with Voldemort. Her musings were cut short when a blood curdling scream was heard from the shop.

Seconds later, Dawlish bolted out of the building covered in blood and shooting spells over his shoulder blindly. He ran right past his fellow aurors without even a backwards glance.

"Coward." Amelia muttered under her breath as the adrenalin began coursing through her veins. She raised her wand towards the shop door and was pleased to note that the other ten aurors with her followed suit. They didn't have to wait long to discover where all the blood on Dawlish came from.

The animated corpse of Mr. Ollivander shambled out the door dragging what appeared to be a leg. With inhuman speed, the Inferi rushed the group of aurors with a bestial growl. It was among them before they could react, unleashing complete chaos on the shocked wizards and witches.

Surprised by the creature's speed and the ferocity of its attack, only a couple of the more experienced aurors were able to protect themselves. They quickly backed away as one of their number crumpled to the ground shrieking in pain.

His cries of agony quickly turned to gurgles as the Inferi ripped out his throat. Torn from her stupor, Amelia shouted, "Fire!" a second later a dozen different spells shredded the animated corpse of Mr. Ollivander.

Shaking slightly from the adrenaline rush, Amelia rasped out, "Kingsley, go check if Stevens is still alive. If he is, get him to St. Mungos."

Nodding in acceptance, Kingsley swept into the building with his wand drawn. He knew the instant that he found Stevens that the man was gone. The Inferi had done its job well. There were bits of the unfortunate auror scattered all over the empty shelves of the shop.

It took him a few seconds to realize what he was seeing before he shouted, "Boss, you need to see this!"

"Secure the remains of both bodies. Do not burn anything!" Amelia said as she glared at her subordinates to make sure they understood her orders to the letter before she headed off to see what had troubled one of her best aurors enough that he actually shouted.

Stepping into the shop two things hit her immediately, the stench of death and the fact that all of the shelves were bare. "Bullocks!" she growled before turning to Kingsley and asking, "I take it that whoever did this left nothing behind?"

Kingsley's deep voice reverberated in the empty shop as he spoke, "Not even a scrap of paper. They were very thorough. The question is why would they take the wands?"

Amelia conjured a chair and sat down heavily. Her body was feeling the aftereffects from the terrifying fight and the loss of two of her people. Letting her thoughts track back to the last time Voldemort was in power, she began looking for any snippets of information that might help them in their current situation.

Realizing that his boss was thinking hard about what this attack meant, he began to prep Auror Steven's body for transport back the Department. He had heard her order of no burning of the bodies even though he was inside the now empty shop.

The thought was so random that she almost let it slip by without considering it. As she began to toss the idea around in her head, Amelia's knuckles were turning white because she was gripping the arms of her conjured chair so hard. Concerned, she asked, "Kinglsey, how many other wand makers are in Great Britain?"

The tall auror immediately grasped the situation as he looked around the empty shelves that once housed thousands of wands. "There are a few others, ma'am. There is one wand maker in Ireland and one in Scotland. The other one that I know of has a small shop in Knockturn Alley."

"Damn." Amelia muttered as she stood up and vanished the chair with a casual flick of her wand. Looking Kingsley straight in the eye, she said solemnly, "Get the two legitimate wand makers out of their shops and under our protection. Make absolutely sure that the people you are using to guard them are not former Death Eaters."

Confused and slightly concerned, Kingsley asked softly, "What's really going on here, ma'am?"

Amelia drew her wand and erected some privacy spells before speaking, "You-Know-Who returned at the end of the Triwizard tournament."

The implication was staggering, and Kingsley actually rocked back on his heels slightly as he tried to comprehend this new and very dangerous twist. Warily, he asked, "Are you sure, ma'am?"

"Positive." She replied before continuing in a very serious tone, "Now do you understand why we need to secure the remaining wand makers?"

"Absolutely, I'll get on it right away." Kingsley replied as he headed out the door to complete his task.

Shaking her head ruefully, Amelia reflected upon how quickly a nice day had gone pear shaped. Two Aurors were dead and the other had fled the scene with no regard for his fellow co-workers. She stepped out of the empty shop and exhaled loudly when she saw the large group of bystanders gathered around the remains of Ollivander the Inferious.

There was a telltale whoosh and pop of a flash bulb going off as Bozo took a picture of the carnage. Thoroughly disgusted, Amelia snapped, "Seize that man's camera! We will want those photos for evidence." Before Bozo could protest, she snapped, "If you don't want to end up in a holding cell for the evening, I suggest you comply with my orders."

Reluctantly, Bozo handed over his camera to one of the aurors, grumbling the entire time about how the people needed to know the

truth. Had his comment come from any legitimate photographer or reporter, she would have just made a copy of the picture and returned the camera to its owner. However, her department had been under fire from Rita Skeeter's articles with quite a few of Bozo's photographs accompanying them.

Stepping over to the newly arrived Auror Tonks, she whispered, "I would not be upset if his camera were to suffer an unfortunate accident once we get the film out." Seeing Tonks nod in understanding, she continued speaking in a hushed tone, "When you're finished, take a group of people you trust and grab the wand maker in Knockturn Alley. I want him spilling all of his secrets and revealing his clients by the end of the day."

"I'll take care of it immediately." Dora said seriously before snapping off a salute and heading off to the Ministry to retrieve the film then dispose of Bozo's camera. As she walked, she was formulating a plan to snatch the wand maker in Knockturn Alley as quickly and quietly as possible.

~AQ~

While Harry and Hermione were wandering around the castle and grounds enjoying their last day at Hogwarts for the year, Albus Dumbledore was preparing for the Order Meeting and revising his plans.

He needed to handle the situation with Severus and Sirius very delicately. Snape was his eyes and ears in Voldemort's camp while Sirius held potential sway over his most valuable asset, Harry Potter.

With that thought in mind, he planned to keep Black out of the majority of the Order business. He didn't want Sirius to tell Harry any Order secrets and then have that information fall into Voldemort's lap through their connection.

Albus suspected that the young man was a horcrux, which brought the confirmed number of them to three. Dumbledore was pretty sure that Tom had made seven of the foul soul vessels. Unfortunately, he needed a memory from the elusive Horace Slughorn to confirm his

hypothesis. The big question remained though, 'What to do about the Horcrux inside of Harry?'

He felt that his original plan of having the boy to blindly sacrifice himself was still the best one, but one that Albus was quickly realizing would never happen. However, he was pretty sure that Harry would make the ultimate sacrifice if he thought it would protect those he considered family and friends. With those ideas in mind, his thoughts turned to luring Voldemort into the Department of Mysteries to hear the full prophecy.

~AQ~

Remus was sitting in the study watching a very livid Sirius pace back and forth, the silence only broken by the occasional bout of swearing from the Head of the Black Family. He had just told Sirius that Dumbledore didn't want him at the meeting under the excuse that he hadn't told Severus or the rest of the order yet.

Bemused, Remus chuckled and said, "Now that you've gotten that out of your system, would you please sit down and listen for a moment?"

With a huff, Sirius flopped down on the couch and put his feet on the coffee table and grumbled, "Okay, I'm calm. What did you have to tell me that was so important?"

"Tell me why Dumbledore doesn't want you at the meeting, please." Remus asked in his teaching voice from his time at Hogwarts.

Before Sirius could answer, he explained, "We know exactly where Snivellous is going to be this evening. Dumbledore said you couldn't be at the meeting, he didn't say anything about being in the castle."

A malicious smile broke out on Sirius's face as he thought about catching Snape alone again. Happily, he said, "I'm actually glad I'll be stuck here at headquarters, nowhere near Hogwarts!"

Remus' only response was to roll his eyes before they began laying out their plans for Snape.

## Chapter 37: United they stand.

"Remus!" Dora bellowed as she entered Grimmauld Place, "Get your lazy arse down here!" Hearing the telltale clopping of people coming down the steps, she headed towards the kitchen to grab a bite while they discussed what her boss wanted her to do.

Sirius and Remus both started at the sounds of Dora's voice shouting up the steps. As they got up to see what she wanted, Remus muttered, "Damn that woman, she's going to give me a heart attack one of these days with that shouting."

Clapping his friend on the shoulder, Sirius replied, "If you think that's bad, wait until she...mmmmffff"

Before he could finish the sentence, Remus clamped his hand over Sirius's mouth and said, "Too much information." Yanking his hand away in disgust, he wiped the drool on his pants and said, "Typical, at least it tells me that your animagus form is appropriate."

Sirius was grinning like an idiot as they entered the kitchen. Seeing Dora, he plopped down in the seat across from her and said, "Still as loud as ever, Nymphadora. What's got your knickers in a twist?"

If she were a basilisk, Sirius would be a stone pillar due to the glare she was giving him. "I'll deal with you later, doggy." Dora growled at her cousin before turning her attention to Remus and asking, "How would you feel about picking up a Death Eater supporter with the full backing of my boss?"

Remus' grin was feral as he replied, "I'd love too. Who are we going to nab?"

"We're going to grab the wand maker in Knockturn Alley." Dora supplied before continuing in a more somber tone, "Ollivander was killed and turned into an Inferius today."

Her statement immediately drove all of the playfulness from the room. When he recovered from the shock of Dora's news, Sirius asked, "What happened?"

For the next fifteen minutes Dora filled them in on everything that she knew about Ollivander, the stolen wands, and the aftermath of the battle.

~AQ~

In a dusty little shop in Knockturn Alley, Lucius Malfoy was sneering at the man behind the worn counter. "Grab your tools and pack up the wands." When the man's eyes widened at the order, Malfoy hissed, "The Dark Lord has need of your services. Report to my manor as soon as you finish packing, and leave the boxes where they are, just take the wands."

When the unkempt shop keeper was finished packing, Lucius waved Bellatrix over and said smoothly, "Please see to it that he is unharmed and set him up in the storage room in the basement."

Nodding, Bellatrix seized the man by his arm and disappeared with a pop, taking them to Malfoy Manor before the wand maker had any second thoughts.

Lucius tapped his cane on the counter idly while he thought over the rest of the plan. His goal was to kill any members of The Order of the Phoenix or the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Fortunately, the Dark Lord gave him plenty of leeway into how that was to be accomplished. With that in mind, he summoned two more Death Eaters to aid him in his endeavor.

The Carrows arrived ten minutes later and began going over the plan with Lucius. It was decided that they would take polyjuice potion and lay in wait to ambush anyone that the Ministry or Dumbledore sent to investigate.

~AQ~

Sirius was sitting in his favorite chair in the study while Dora and Remus went over the plans to snatch the wand maker from Knockturn Alley as a growing feeling of unease settled upon him.

Putting his tea down on the end table, he interrupted, "I've got a bad feeling about this one."

Remus turned to look at his friend and saw the worry in his eyes and said, "What's bothering you, Sirius?"

"It's too easy." Sirius grumbled as he stood up and began pacing around the edges of the room. Absent mindedly, he plucked a book from the shelf to give his hands something to do before continuing his pacing. After a few seconds of thought, he whispered, "If I were Voldemort, I would have taken the wand maker in Knockturn first. Not many people go down there so no one would notice right away."

Dora opened her mouth to respond before clicking it shut as she realized the truth in her cousin's words. "Damn." She muttered under her breath before sitting up a touch straighter and saying, "We're going to need more people to do this the right way. The problem is that the longer we wait, the more likely that the wand maker will slip through our fingers."

"I'll quietly ask a few old acquaintances if they would be interested in helping." Remus added before getting up from his spot on the couch and looking at the door.

"Okay. I guess that I'll report into Madam Bones and get her input before staking out the shop." Dora said while turning her attention to Sirius, "Please bring my parents up to speed." Glancing down at her watch, she added, "Why don't we meet back here around five to go over everything before Remus heads to Hogwarts for his 'Secret' meeting." She finished while making quotation marks with fingers.

With nods all around, they each left to begin their assigned tasks as quickly as possible.

~AQ~

The smell of antiseptic and cleaning products assaulted her nose while she tried to figure out where she was. A slight groan escaped Daphne's lips when she tried to sit up and the pain washed over her in waves.

"Shhh. Lay still, Daphne. Your father went to fetch the healer." Her mother said softly while holding her daughter's remaining hand. Realizing that her daughter was trying to speak, Evelyn Greengrass held a cup of water to her eldest child's lips while cradling her head.

"Thank you." Daphne rasped after she swallowed some water. Confusion spread across her features momentarily as to why she couldn't move her right arm even though she could feel it. When she glanced over at her arm, she was shocked to find nothing there but a mass of bandages. Too shocked to speak, she tentatively reached her left hand over to confirm that her eyes weren't deceiving her.

Fear, anger, and despair washed across her face as she looked up at her mother momentarily before breaking into soft sobs and starting to rock back and forth.

Evelyn gently swept her daughter into a hug and began mumbling words of comfort as tears leaked from her own eyes.

After a few minutes, Daphne croaked out, "What happened to me?"

Finding it difficult to tell her daughter what really happened, Mrs. Greengrass faltered a few times before managing to say, "You were hit by debris from a stray spell." Softly, she whispered into Daphne's hair, "You're lucky to be alive."

Daphne didn't disagree with her mother's assessment at all. Especially if the injuries were so severe that she was missing her arm. Tentatively, she reached up with her remaining hand and touched the bandages on her chest and face as if inspecting the damage. "Who did this to me?" she rasped while her fingers traced the bandage on the side of her face.

"Draco Malfoy fired a spell at Harry Potter and hit the Slytherin table instead. He was expelled and turned over to Amelia Bones." Evelyn answered. "Astoria told me the details, she's fine the debris missed her." She supplied quickly seeing the mounting worry in her daughter's face.

"Was anyone else injured?" Daphne whispered fearfully, dreading the answer.

Looking at her daughter and trying to gauge her emotional state, Evelyn decided that Daphne needed to know the details to help with her own recovery, so she said, "Tracey Davis was seriously injured but Harry Potter saved her life. The complete coverage of what happened is in the Daily Prophet and Astoria assures me that it is a very accurate article for once."

Daphne began slowly running her hand across her face and body while her mother filled her in on the details of the article. It was a few minutes later when she realized that her mother had stopped talking and was watching her trace her newly acquired scars with her fingers.

Softly, she asked, "Mum, can I have a mirror please?"

Evelyn had been dreading this moment since her daughter woke up. She knew that Daphne wasn't vain, but did take pride in her appearance. Slowly, she pulled her mirror out of her purse and held it up for her to see.

The tears welled up in her eyes once the bandages were removed and she looked at her 'new' appearance in the mirror. Most of the smaller cuts had been healed and the scars were almost invisible. There was a large scar that no amount of magic could remove that ran from the corner of her mouth and down the edge of her jaw line where a piece of the table had injured her.

Terrified, she slowly undid the drawstrings on the hospital gown and let it pool around her waist so she could see how bad those scars were as well.

Silently, Evelyn enlarged the mirror so Daphne could see her entire torso. She carefully kept her sobs stifled as she too got her first look at how lucky Daphne was to even be alive.

A tentative knock on the door interrupted the silent moment. Composing herself as best as she could, Evelyn said, "Enter."

The pale form of Tracey Davis entered the room and made her way over to the now covered Daphne. Reaching out, she clasped her hand with Daphne's remaining one and whispered, "I was so scared."

Daphne pulled her best friend into a one armed embrace and sobbed quietly, "I don't have any recollection of what happened at all. I'm just glad that we're both alive."

"Me too, Daph. Me too." Replied Tracey in a choked voice.

~AQ~

Later that evening, Remus was walking up the path towards the gates of Hogwarts with Sirius by his side hidden beneath Harry's invisibility cloak. Sirius had the Marauder's Map in his hands and was busy scanning the map for Snape's name.

After searching for a bit, he finally found what he was looking for; Snape was holed up in his office. Quietly, Sirius whispered, "The greasy git is in his office in the dungeons. If I hurry, I can ambush him at the secret passageway by the hump backed witch."

Continuing their trek up to the castle, Remus nodded minutely and whispered, "Good hunting. I'll see you back at headquarters when the meeting is over."

With a gleam in his eye, Sirius headed off towards his ambush spot moving effortlessly under the cloak like he and James had done numerous times during their years at Hogwarts.

Reaching the headmaster's office, Remus gave the password and when the gargoyle slid aside, he made his way up the stone steps and into Dumbledore's domain.

Albus looked up as the werewolf entered his office. He gestured towards the refreshments in the corner while saying pleasantly, "Please make yourself comfortable. Severus should be joining us soon and then we can begin."

Snatching a sandwich and drink, Remus made his way over to where Minerva and Arthur Weasley were sitting together. "May I?" he asked while gesturing to the empty seat.

"Of course, Remus." McGonagall answered warmly before saying, "You're looking well."

"Thank you." He answered while setting his food on the table and pulling up his chair. "I've been able to find a reliable supplier for the Wolfsbane Potion for the first time since I worked here and it's made a big difference."

Smiling, Arthur happily said, "That's wonderful. If you ever need a place to recover, Molly and I would be more than happy to have you at the Burrow."

Warmed by the generous offer, Remus said, "Thank you. If I'm ever in need, I may take you up on that."

~AQ~

Sirius had arrived at the ambush point and proceeded to cast every concealment spell that he knew to hide his presence before settling down to wait for Snape to make his way up from the dungeons.

Sirius didn't have to wait long before Snape rounded the corner up from the dungeons with his black robes billowing out behind him as he stalked towards the headmaster's office. The moment that the Death Eater passed his hiding spot, Sirius struck.

The resounding whack of the beater's bat striking Severus on the base of the skull reverberated in the corridor. For good measure, Sirius kicked him hard in the chest just to be sure he was unconscious. Sure that Snape wasn't a threat at the moment; Sirius trussed him up using a few of the zip ties that John Granger had picked up at the hardware store specifically for binding prisoners.

It took him a couple of tries to make sure that the ties were nice and tight before he hoisted the surprisingly heavy Death Eater onto his shoulder and making his way down the secret passageway. The plan

was to avoid using any magic because they weren't sure what Dumbledore would be able to detect.

Fifteen grueling minutes later, Sirius was breathing heavily and covered in sweat. Finally clear of the wards, he apparated back to Grimmauld Place and unceremoniously dumped Snape on the floor. The crack of something breaking when the bastard hit the floor helped ease the pain in Sirius' tired muscles and put a smile on his face.

With a sigh, he flicked his wand at the bound and unconscious man and levitated him down to the cells in the basement. Once there, he vanished Snape's clothes and bound him to the chair, naked.

Sirius was a bit surprised at the sheer amount of items in Snape's pockets. Unidentified potions, a couple of knives, two wands, a miniature foe glass, and what appeared to be a necklace with a few strands of red hair in a locket.

Confused, Sirius carefully moved everything to the table without touching anything by hand. It wouldn't do to get killed now that he had his prey trapped by being lazy. Satisfied that the items were secure and that Snape wasn't going anywhere, he settled down to wait for Remus to return from what was sure to be a very entertaining meeting of the Order of the Phoenix.

~AQ~

Dumbledore was beginning to worry. He knew that Severus was in the castle as they had spoken to each other about an hour ago and it wasn't like the young man to disappear without letting him know somehow.

Rising from his chair, Albus made his way over to Minerva and quietly asked, "Would you please fetch Severus?" At her curious glance, he supplied, "He's late and that is most unlike him."

"Of course, Albus." Minerva said and rose from her seat to fetch their errant member.

Remus looked up at the headmaster and asked the question on everyone's mind, "Is everything all right, Headmaster?"

Staring into Lupin's eyes for a moment, Albus said solemnly, "I'm not sure, actually. Severus is always punctual so either something delayed him or he was called away unexpectedly."

Neither man voiced the other option that something bad had happened to the spy. Inwardly, Remus howled with laughter because this was confirmation that Sirius had succeeded in his endeavor and he couldn't wait to get back to headquarters and question their former classmate.

A bright white tabby patronus burst through the door and said in Minerva's anxious Scottish brogue, "I can't find Severus anywhere and there are no signs of a struggle."

Headmaster and werewolf locked gazes again and Albus mumbled, "Damnation." In a stronger voice he said, "We will have to cancel the meeting and investigate this immediately. Time is of the essence."

Looking each member in the eyes, he said gravely, "Assume that Severus has been compromised at this point and take steps to protect your families accordingly."

As people began filing from the room, Albus stopped Remus and asked, "We could really use your assistance in this matter."

Remus paused a moment, sighed, and said, "Of course, Albus. I may not like the man but I respect his position and the sacrifices that he makes. What would you like me to do?"

Albus' eyes unfocused momentarily while he pondered the options most likely to provide any leads. He knew that time was of the essence if Severus had really defected or been captured by someone. "Please check Knockturn Alley, specifically the apothecary and Borgin and Burkes."

"I'll send word when my search is complete." Remus said before turning without a backwards glance at the aged wizard. Once he was

clear of the wards, he apparated to the Leaky Cauldron and made his way to Knockturn Alley.

He figured that he should make an appearance in those areas on the off chance that Albus was having him followed. An hour later, Remus sent his patronus to Dumbledore stating his 'failure' and began making a few random jumps to throw off any tails before finally checking himself for any tracking spells then apparating back to Grimmauld Place.

~AQ~

While the Order of the Phoenix was searching the castle and various parts of Great Britain for their missing spy, Nymphadora Tonks was sitting down to a light dinner with her parents and the Grangers, John, and Annabelle. They were actually eating at her parent's house for a change to provide the Grangers with more exposure to the magical world and its quirks.

After watching her daughter push around the food on her plate rather than inhaling it like she normally did, Andromeda said, "What's bothering you, Dora?"

With a sigh, Dora put down her fork and looked at everyone briefly before saying, "My boss knows that all of you are guardians for Harry Potter and wants to meet with him to talk about what happened at the school with Draco Malfoy."

Frowning in concern, Ted asked, "Does Dumbledore know that we have custody of Harry?"

Shaking her head no, Dora replied, "Not yet, but he will soon. He told Amelia to contact him to arrange for her to meet with Harry at the Dursleys."

John's chuckling brought everyone's attention to him so he cleared his throat and said cheerfully, "So what happens if she never contacts him? Do you think it will slip his mind or will he just figure that it is best to not remind Amelia about talking to Harry?" Seeing everyone contemplating what he had just said, he continued, "From what I

know of Dumbledore, he really sounds like the type to prevent or delay that meeting anyway."

"That's probably true, he does have an unnatural interest in Harry and who can and can't reach him. Personally, I think it's related to that prophecy that we still have to get Harry to listen to." Dora said seriously.

"Why don't we just invite Amelia over for dinner here one evening and let her meet with Harry if he's okay with that?" Andromeda asked.

Nodding in agreement, Annabelle said, "I think that would work for the best and it will show her that we are involved in both aspects of his upbringing if John and I attend as well."

"That's a good idea." Ted said congenially while everyone else was nodding in agreement.

Checking her watch, Dora changed the topic, "Sirius should be back from Hogwarts by now with his 'guest' if he was successful." She then proceeded to bring everyone up to speed on the events from the day and their plans to capture Snape and the wand maker from Knockturn Alley.

~AQ~

Harry and Hermione had said goodbye to their friends after the leaving feast and had Dobby and Winky bring them back home afterwards. They arrived to an empty house and decided that a quiet dinner was the perfect ending for a stressful day.

Once dessert had been polished off, they snuggled up on the couch in the library, with Harry reading over Hermione's shoulder. They were going over the book about Coatl's that Remus had given them when exclaimed, "Harry! Look at this passage!"

Moving his eyes to where her finger was indicating, Harry read the passage before untangling himself from Hermione and moving to the middle of the room. He shimmered for a second before he shifted into his animagus form stretching his wings tentatively.

Hermione had never seen his wings unfurled before so she sat down on the floor right in front of him. Very carefully, she reached out and asked, "May I touch them?"

Harry the Coatl gave her a nod of his scaly head and slithered a little closer to give her better access to his wings. Once she was done inspecting them, he waited until she had moved away and extended his wings to their fullest extent. Letting instinct take over, he flapped his wings a few times and rose into the air.

He found it extremely difficult to hover so he began trying to fly about the room. It was surprisingly harder than it looked and very tiring trying to fly indoors. After a couple of minutes, he landed unceremoniously in a heap on the chair, too tired to transform back just yet.

Moving over to where Harry collapsed, she gently lifted the upper portion of his torso onto her lap while whispering how proud of him she was.

After a few minutes under her ministrations, Harry slithered to the floor and transformed back with a smile on his face. "That was brilliant!" he blurted excitedly.

"I never thought that I would see a Coatl in person, let alone one flying! I'm so proud of you, Harry!" Hermione said happily. "Now, you are going to be a good husband and tell me exactly how it feels to make the transformation." She told him while giving him a look that brooked no excuses.

Gulping slightly at the look Hermione was giving him, Harry nodded and proceeded to tell her everything that he experienced when he was changing forms.

~AQ~

Severus Snape regained consciousness and began taking stock of his surroundings without opening his eyes or even giving any hints that he was awake. It took exactly three seconds for him to realize

that he was in serious trouble. He was naked, bound tightly to a chair, and his wrist was probably broken.

Realizing that he wouldn't get any more information without taking a look around, he opened his eyes and was quickly forced to shut them when a bright light shown directly into them.

Suddenly, a harsh voice barked, "There's no use struggling, Death Eater. In a few minutes, we are going to dose you with enough veritaserum to have you singing your deepest, darkest, secrets."

Unable to see the person speaking, Snape closed his eyes and waited patiently while he surreptitiously tried to free himself from his bonds.

Fifteen minutes later Remus entered the basement with a bottle of veritaserum, a recording quill, and a pad of parchment in hand. He joined Sirius behind the light so Snape couldn't see them and nodded once.

Seeing his friend nod that he was ready, Sirius silently stunned Snape and proceeded to force open the Death Eater's mouth.

Remus poured three drops of the truth serum down Snape's throat then stepped back behind the light. Once Sirius had joined him, he cast a voice altering charm on himself and sat down to begin the interrogation.

Sirius made sure that his glamour charms were in place and after receiving a confirming nod from Remus, he conjured a large tub of ice water and a bucket before proceeding to place Severus' feet into the frigid water.

Once he was satisfied that everything was set, Sirius began slapping Snape in the face until the man woke up.

Shivering and disoriented, Snape tried to focus on the face of the man in front of him but all he could see was shadows due to the bright light shining into his eyes.

Suddenly, a voice behind the light asked, "Are you a loyal Death Eater?"

Compelled by the potion to answer, Snape slurred, "No."

Somewhat surprised, Remus recovered and asked, "Where do your loyalties lie?"

"With Albus Dumbledore." Snape answered even though he was desperately trying to fight the effects of the Veritaserum.

Remus sat there mulling over what Snape had just revealed. As an Order of the Phoenix member, he knew that the man was a spy but had always felt that Severus was loyal only to himself.

Curious, Remus asked, "Why are you loyal to Dumbledore?"

Snape was now visibly struggling against the potion but its hold was too strong and he gasped out, "Because the Dark Lord killed the only woman I've ever loved."

Putting the pieces together, Sirius yanked Snape's hair back forcing the man to look directly into the bright light and growled, "Who's hair is in that locket?"

"Lily's." Snape whispered as tears streamed down his face.

Disgusted with himself, and the man in front of him, Sirius quickly let go of Severus' hair and stalked over to the far corner to compose himself. With his back against the wall, he slowly slid down until he was sitting on the floor with his head hanging between his knees as he lamented the loss of his best friend and the women he loved as well.

Realizing that Sirius was lost to him for a few minutes, Remus returned to the questioning, "Why are you so hard on Harry Potter?"

Even under the effects of veritaserum, Snape realized who his two interrogators were. Compelled to answer the question, he looked up

to where he knew Remus Lupin was sitting and said, "Because, Remus, Harry is a daily reminder of what I threw away in my anger."

There was a thump as Remus' hand hit the table in shock before his head followed. The only sound in the room for the next few minutes was the not so silent weeping of three men that had lost a woman that they loved from afar.

## Chapter 38: Opening Gambits.

It took Sirius a few minutes to compose himself after the emotional roller coaster that their questioning of Snape started. Blinking back the tears, he stood up, angrily strode over and yanked the Death Eater by his greasy hair so that they were face to face. In a menacing voice, he hissed, "What would you do if presented with the opportunity to harm Harry, Hermione, Remus, or myself?"

Compelled by the truth serum still flowing through his veins, Snape said, "I would not harm Potter but I would do my best to see the rest of you injured or dead."

Remus' head snapped up at hearing Severus' declaration and he bolted to his feet in a towering rage. His eyes had completely changed over to amber showing that the wolf was extremely close to the surface.

Looking into his friends face, Sirius quickly backed away at the sight of the amber eyes dilated in anger and the slight fangs poking out of Remus' mouth.

Even through his potion's induced haze, Snape realized that the man approaching him was partially transformed. Panicked, Severus was trying everything in his power to escape the bonds that held him securely to the chair. Shrieking in terror while he struggled fruitlessly against the restraints, he shouted, "Stay away from me you filthy werewolf!" As Remus continued towards him, he quickly glanced over at Black and bellowed, "Keep him away from me!"

Furious, Remus reached down, grasped the sides of Snape's head and lifted him clean off the floor until they were eye level. His voice was barely recognizable as he growled, "You will never get the chance to harm another innocent." Before Snape could respond, or Sirius recovered from his shock, Remus slammed Snape back onto the ground and gave a violent twist with his hands.

Snape's screams stopped abruptly with the ominous snapping noise as the angered werewolf broke the Death Eater's neck. With a howl of rage, Remus grabbed the dead spy and hurled him across the

room and into the wall, shattering the chair that Snape was bound to in the process.

His mouth hanging open in shock, Sirius slowly approached his best friend with his palms open outwards. Quietly, he called, "Remus?" He watched his friend struggling for control of his emotions but was at a loss on how to help him.

Suddenly, Dora was there, wrapping her arms around the enraged man and whispering words of comfort in his ear. As she felt Remus begin to calm down, she pulled him down to the floor and continued to console him.

His amber eyes still sparkling, Remus looked up into Dora's face and saw understanding and acceptance rather than the revulsion he was expecting. "Why?" he rasped, his voice beginning to return to normal.

Stroking his cheek, Dora whispered, "Because you're a good man, Remus Lupin, and I couldn't give my heart to a monster." Before he could contradict her, she placed a finger over his mouth and said firmly, "You are not a monster." Waving her hand in the general direction of the cooling body in the corner, she said with conviction, "Snape was a monster and got everything he deserved."

"How much did you see and hear?" Remus asked quietly.

"All of it." Dora replied truthfully as she continued to stare into his amber eyes before leaning down and placing a loving kiss on his lips.

~AQ~

The unmistakable sound of the metal lock being slid back woke Draco with a start. He had been trying to avoid falling asleep but his need for rest finally overpowered his fear and he drifted off in a semi sitting position in the corner of his bunk. He tried to make himself as small as possible as the figure on the bunk above him grumbled at the disturbance.

"Come on Travis, we have to be on station in ten." shouted the auror from the door to the man on the top bunk who was in the process of climbing down.

"Keep your robes on, Hamish, I'm coming!" grumbled Travis as he sat down on the lower bunk to pull on his boots. With a leer, he turned to the corner where he knew the Malfoy boy was cowering and drawled, "Sleep well, Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco had frozen in fear when the man started climbing down so he missed the exchange between the two aurors. When the large man sat on his bed, he did something he hadn't done since he was five, he wet himself.

"Blimey!" Travis blurted when the stench hit him causing him to scramble off the bed and move towards the door. "He soiled himself!" he yelped to his partner in disgust.

The last thing Draco heard was the laughter of the two aurors as the door was sealed cutting off all noise from outside his cell.

~AQ~

Ted and Andromeda were down in the basement of headquarters finishing up the second round of Goyle's interrogation while Dora, Remus, and Sirius were talking about what to do with Snape's body. They were being just loud enough in their discussion that Goyle was able to hear everything.

Suddenly, Snape's lifeless body was dumped at the foot of the stairs right in Goyle's line of sight, causing the large mans anxiety levels to skyrocket. Seeing the fear on their prisoner's face, Andromeda drawled pleasantly, "Oh, don't you worry about Severus, dear. He's quite dead."

Seeing his panicked eyes dart between the dead body of his comrade and his captors, Ted asked, "Is there anything else you would like to tell us that could prevent you ending up like him?" while his thumb pointed in the general direction of the crumpled body on the floor.

Being under the effects of the truth potion still, Goyle's addled mind took that request literally and he began a lengthy tale of every wrong doing that he was ever a part of or had heard of. By the time the potion wore off, Goyle was exhausted and Ted and Andromeda had fifty pages of very disturbing notes.

Disgusted with the man in front of them, Ted stepped forward and said coldly, "I promised that we wouldn't kill you and we won't." Seeing Goyle sag slightly in relief, he continued, "However, we can't just let you go either." Taking aim, he pointed his wand at Goyle's face and said, "Obliviate!" while concentrating on the desire to erase everything back to the level of a baby.

~AQ~

Albus Dumbledore sat alone in his office in the highest tower of Hogwarts. The only noises were the occasional whirring and puffing of various magical trinkets scattered about the room. His gaze was unfocused while he tapped his finger tips together in front of his lips.

He knew without a doubt that Snape was dead. The life stone that Severus had given him hung from his pinkies on a fine golden chain. Instead of its usual vibrant white, it dangled there, blackened and cracked; the ultimate proof that his primary spy within Voldemort's ranks was lost forever.

The burning question in his mind was, 'Which side did the deed?' Dumbledore knew that Severus was only tolerated because of his support. Part of him hoped that it was someone from the Order that got him because the thought of Voldemort questioning Snape would be devastating on many different levels.

Resigned, Albus sighed softly before opening the top drawer of his desk and gently setting the stone inside then slowly closing the drawer. It was as close to a proper burial he could give his dead spy unless the body was actually found.

Going on the assumption that Snape was compromised before he died, Dumbledore began mentally going through his plans that would have to be altered. Fortunately, he didn't really trust Severus with too

much information because of his proximity to very dangerous people so not much would have to be changed.

Struggling up from his chair, he shuffled over to his lab and retrieved the vial of the Elixir of Life. Swirling the liquid slowly, Dumbledore admired the shifting shades of red as the firelight illuminated the bottle. Gathering up his courage, he pulled the stopper and downed the contents in one quick gulp.

Nicholas had once described how it felt when you drank the Elixir of Life but until you experience it for yourself, words didn't do it justice. Dumbledore's veins burned with a liquid fire as the Elixir did its work. The pain was excruciating, causing Albus to cry out as he fell to his knees as the empty vial slipped from his fingers and shattered on the stone floor.

Another wave of pain seared through him, causing Dumbledore to fall forward. He barely got his hands out in time to prevent banging his head on the stone floor. The agony was so great, that the cuts from the glass embedded into his hands barely registered.

Fifteen agonizing minutes later, the pain subsided and Albus struggled to his feet and staggered towards his private chambers. Head swimming from the Elixir, he barely made it to his bed before collapsing unconscious face down.

~AQ~

Watching his cousin comfort his best friend, Sirius sighed in relief before silently levitating Snape's lifeless body up the stairs before returning for the mindless Goyle, Sr. Once he had both of them in the parlor, he tied them together and called, "Dobby!"

There was a slight pop when Dobby appeared in the room and said politely, "How may I help, Master Sirius?"

Sirius waited for Dobby to realize that there were two other bodies in the room before saying, "We need these two to be found in Knockturn Alley in the morning. Can you arrange for that without being discovered?"

Ears back at the slight on being seen, Dobby coolly replied, "Of course, sir. I will take care of that immediately." Without waiting for any other commands, Dobby stepped over and grabbed a hold of both bodies and disappeared with a much louder than normal crack.

Wiping the sweat off his brow, Sirius mumbled, "Note to self, don't make the elf angry." Shaking his head ruefully, he left the parlor to search for some liquid medicine of the alcoholic variety for everyone.

~AQ~

Harry wandered downstairs to stretch his legs and fetch a glass of water. In his hands was one of his books on occlumency. He was so engrossed in the text that he didn't notice Hermione's parents leaning against the counter and talking quietly amongst themselves.

When John and Annabelle saw Harry walk in, they noticed how immersed he was in his book so they continued talking quietly. Their smiles grew larger as Harry moved around the room on autopilot as he gathered his drink and left the room without ever noticing that he wasn't alone. It was something that they had seen Hermione do hundreds of times in their old home and it filled them with joy to see how comfortable Harry had become in the house.

Motioning with her hands for John to keep quiet, Annabelle silently followed Harry up the steps towards the library. He was so engrossed in his reading that he didn't even notice his in-laws trailing half a landing behind him.

Harry flopped down next to Hermione and handed her his glass without even looking up from his book. On autopilot, Hermione had extended her hand at that exact moment and plucked the glass from his hand without tearing her gaze from her book either.

John and Annabelle stood in the doorway transfixed by the scene in front of them. The two teens were displaying a level of communication not achieved outside of couples that had been married for decades and sometimes not at all. They watched the silent interactions between Harry and Hermione for a few minutes in

awe before Annabelle said softly, "It's getting late. Are you two going to turn in soon?"

Startled from their private thoughts, the two teens jumped slightly in their seats before Hermione squeaked happily, "Mum, Dad!" before hopping up and racing over to them to exchange hugs. Harry followed at a more sedate pace before exchanging his own hugs and pleasantries with the in-laws.

"Hello Mr. and Mrs. Granger. How was your dinner?" Harry asked politely when he stepped back from Annabelle's hug.

"It was enlightening. Dining in a magical house takes some getting used to." John smiled as he answered Harry's question.

Remembering fondly all of the meals he'd eaten during better times at the Burrow with the Weasleys made Harry smile in return before he answered knowingly, "Yes, it does. Doesn't it?"

"Why don't you two get ready for bed? We have a big day planned for tomorrow and we'll have to get started early." Annabelle said warmly as she steered the young couple towards their room.

~AQ~

With a soft pop, two aurors appeared in the alleyway directly across from the wand makers shop in Edinburgh, Scotland. Kingsley stood motionless, his cloak pulled closed against the slight chill in the air, as he searched the area for anything out of the ordinary.

Deciding that nothing was amiss, he gestured to his partner and they quickly crossed the street and opened the door to the shop with their wands at the ready. The bell above the door chimed as they entered causing Kinglsey to flinch at forgetting something so elementary.

The tinkling of the bells brought the shopkeeper out of his workshop to greet his visitors. Wiping his hands on his apron, Mr. Davidson noticed the drawn wands and auror badges and asked carefully, "How may I help you gentleman today?"

Having no easy way to break the news to the shop keep, Kinglsey motioned for his partner to stand guard by the door and said calmly, "We're here to escort you to a safe house. Mr. Ollivander was killed and turned into an inferious today."

Leaning against the counter for support, Armand took a few moments to gather himself before whispering, "Does this mean what I think it does?"

Looking the old man in the eyes, Shacklebolt answered, "It does. Now please gather up your things, time is of the essence. We think Voldemort is targeting all of the wand makers in Great Britain for some reason."

Just as Armand was beginning to gather his supplies, Shacklebolt's partner, barked out a harsh whisper, "Shite! We have company!" and began setting as many defensive spells on the front of the shop as he could. When he was done, Smyth turned to them and asked, "Is there a secret way out of here?"

The wand maker nodded and pointed behind the counter before moving over to it and undoing the concealing and locking spells. Once they were gone, he opened the door and motioned for the aurors to follow him.

Kinglsey was halfway down the trap door when he realized that his Smyth wasn't following him. With a questioning look on his face, he peered back at his partner.

"Go. I'll hold them off while you get Mr. Davidson to safety." Smyth said resolutely while looking Kinglsey in the eyes.

With a nod of understanding, Shacklebolt whispered, "God speed." before closing the hatch behind him. He felt the concealment charms go back up seconds before he heard the front door being blasted apart. Seeing the wand maker standing by the tunnel, he gently pushed him in the back and whispered, "Go. Smyth is going to buy us some time."

With a shocked nod of acceptance, Armand turned and began leading Kinglsey down the hidden passage to safety. At the end of the tunnel, there was a small, dimly lit, room with a ladder going up through another trap door.

Pointing to the hatch, Kinglsey asked, "Where does this lead?"

"The door leads to the basement of the pub on the street behind my shop." Mr. Davidson whispered before continuing, "It's owned by my cousin so we should be safe."

There was a loud blasting noise followed by a showering of dust from the carved ceiling. Eyes widening in horror, Kinglsey vanished the trap door and practically dragged the old wand maker up the ladder with him in his haste. Just as they cleared the trap door, a cloud of dust and debris blew upward.

"Damnation." Kinglsey muttered before turning to Mr. Davidson and saying solemnly, "Grab my arm, I'm going to apparate us to the safe house before I contact Madam Bones."

~AQ~

Smyth ducked behind the one of the shelves containing wands when the door was blasted apart. Shrapnel peppered the wall and counter with lethal force making him glad he was lucky enough to get to safety. Before the dust settled, he fired two quick blasting hexes in the direction of the front door and dove behind the shopkeeper's counter.

Yaxley was climbing over the remains of the front door when the first curse struck his shoulder spinning him around in a shower of blood. He landed in a heap next the door frame where his partner, Gibbon calmly stepped over his bleeding body with a shield at the ready.

"Come out wand maker and I'll make your death quick." Gibbon hissed in anger. With a flick of his wand the dust in the air dissipated and he took stock of the situation. There were dozens of wands scattered about from where he had blown in the door but no sign of the wizard that owned the shop.

Smyth knew he only had moments until his hiding spot was located and he would be forced to fight for his life. He knew that he needed to give Kingsley more time to get the old man to safety so he crept to the edge of the counter and held up a transfigured mirror inches from the floor.

He could see a black robed figure just inside the hole in the front of the shop and the feet of another lying in a pool of rapidly spreading blood. Steadying himself, he rolled clear of the counter and barked, "Avada Kedavra!"

Gibbon saw the movement out of the corner of his eye and instinctively yelled, "Avada Kedavra!" at the unidentified person.

The two killing curses struck each other and the magical explosion that followed ripped apart a good portion of the shop. Gibbon's last thought as he was sent flying through the air was of his family before his neck was snapped by the force of the impact with the stone wall.

Nigel's eyes widened briefly in surprise before he was blasted backwards into the base of the shelves behind the sales counter. The shelf teetered for a moment before it came crashing down onto the counter burying the injured auror under hundreds of wands.

Moving slowly to protect his injured ribs and hip, Smyth poked his head up to assess the situation. Before he could move any further, the shelf above him gave an ominous creaking noise and split in half and his world exploded in pain before he blacked out.

~AQ~

The explosion sent the residents both scurrying for cover and peering from their windows to see the commotion. Once the smoke cleared, some people ran forward to see if they could help Mr. Davidson while others flooded the floo network with calls to the Ministry of Magic for help.

The auror on duty, the freshly demoted Dawlish, sent a flying memo to his superior and went back to reading Rita Skeeter's recent article about the disaster in Hogwarts and grumbling about a lack of respect.

Fifteen minutes later, the desk sergeant received the vague memo and dispatched an auror to Edinburgh's version of Diagon Alley to investigate. He then sent a memo to Amelia Bones letting her know what happened and what action was taken before returning to his mountain of parchment work.

Amelia was sitting in her favorite chair by the fire in the den of her row house not far from the Prime Minister's residence when a lynx patronus burst through her living room wall and began to speak with Kinglsey's voice.

"The wand maker is secure but we ran into trouble. Smyth held them off while we got out." The lynx finished speaking and faded from existence, its purpose fulfilled.

"Damn." Amelia muttered as she rose from her seat and headed for the floo, her tea and book forgotten on the end table.

As she stepped out of the fireplace into her office, she noticed a memo floating around the room. Snatching the annoying piece of flying parchment out of the air, she ripped it open and read the missive. She checked the time on the memo before tossing it down on her desk and heading for the duty sergeant.

"Masterson!" Amelia barked when she rounded the corner into the greeting area where the desk sergeant's desk was located. "Gather up a full squad with a healer and send them to Mr. Davidson's wand shop in Edinburgh. Tell them that we may have a man down and I'll meet them there in thirty minutes." Without another word, Amelia strode out of the office to the apparition point in the atrium before vanishing with a soft pop.

She reappeared outside a non-descript farming village in Wales before disillusioning herself and heading towards a rundown farm house overlooking a small stream. Once she reached the door,

Amelia knocked twice, paused, knocked four more times and stepped back a foot from the door.

Kinglsey heard the code being knocked and hoped that it was his boss at the door. Motioning to Mr. Davidson to stay quiet and to cover him, he cautiously opened the door with his wand drawn. After confirming that the person at the door was indeed his superior, he waved her inside and began casting wards around the door for some added safety.

The small safe house had that faint musty smell that often resides in homes that don't see enough use. The inside was much nicer than the exterior due to a liberal amount of magic in use but it wasn't opulent by any stretch of the imagination.

Once Shacklebolt was finished with his defensive spell casting, Amelia waved both men over to the seats in front of the fire so they could discuss a few things. Clearing her throat, she said warmly, "I'm glad to see that you both made it out alive. I have a team on the way to Edinburgh to see if Smyth is okay as well."

"Thank you, Director. I hope he made it. The tunnel collapsed just as we were climbing out." the large auror replied in his surprisingly alto voice.

Climbing to her feet, Amelia said seriously, "I'm not going to tell anyone that you are here. If someone comes to collect Mr. Davidson in my name, escape if you can. If not, kill them before they can return the favor."

Mr. Davidson bobbed his head jerkily in understanding as he tried to process all of the shocking things that had been thrown at him today.

Kingsley nodded once in acceptance with a hard look on his face before saying, "If we don't hear from you in two days, we'll move to the backup safe house and I'll try to find someone I can trust to contact."

"Find Auror Tonks." Amelia replied immediately. Seeing Shacklebolt's frown, she said, "She's deeper in this mess than you are and knows a

great deal about what is going on. She also has the resources available to help or to hide Mr. Davidson if things go pear shaped."

Intrigued, Kingsley said cautiously, "I promise that I'll do that if it comes to it. Good luck, ma'am."

"Thank you, Kingsley." Amelia said somberly before heading out, hoping that Smyth was still alive.

~AQ~

The last three days had been some of the longest, and loneliest, of Ron's short life so far. The reality of what he had thrown away in his jealousy and fits of temper really hit home on the ride to Kings Cross Station at the end of the term.

He spent the bulk of the time talking with Ginny and Neville about his feelings and the events of the year after he had apologized again. Following their advice, he had been trying to write an apology to Harry and Hermione but they just didn't sound right when put on paper. The evidence of his frustration was littered all over the floor of his bedroom.

Sighing in frustration, he crumpled up his current attempt and hurled the ball of parchment at the bin in the corner. Not knowing what else to do, he stood up from his desk and began pacing his room while muttering to himself.

Charlie had filled his parents in on what he had learned at Hogwarts about Ron and his actions. Molly had wanted to send a howler at first but her husband had put his foot down and said that they would speak with their youngest son when he returned home for the summer holidays.

She was carrying Ron's laundry up to his room when she heard him muttering under his breath. Deciding that this would be a good time to broach some of the issues from the school year, she knocked lightly and opened the door.

"Ron?" Molly called softly as she watched her son pace the room.

Startled by his mum's voice, Ron jumped a little then blurted, "Mum! Knock or make some noise next time!"

Chuckling at her son's antics, she smiled and warmly said, "I did knock. You were so lost in your thoughts that you didn't hear it so I opened the door." Watching Ron blush slightly reminded her of how young he really was. After closing the door softly, she sat on the bed and patted the spot next to her.

When Ron finally sat down, she pulled him into a one armed hug and asked, "Have you been thinking about what happened between you and Harry and Hermione this year, dear?"

With an audible sigh, Ron slouched down and put his head in his hands. A few seconds later, he mumbled, "I really messed up and I don't think that they are going to forgive me this time."

Before Molly could respond to Ron's outburst, she realized that he was sobbing silently. Shocked because he hadn't cried in front of her in a few years, Molly did what came natural to her, she pulled her youngest son into a hug and whispered words of comfort to him while trying to figure out what to do.

~AQ~

Voldemort stood alone in the cemetery in Godric's Hollow looking down at the tombstone of Ariana Dumbledore. His visit with Grindelwald had proved very enlightening and he planned to use every tool at his disposal in his quest to bring Dumbledore down.

With a casual flick of his wand, the earth parted and a casket gently rose out of the ground. It was in remarkably good shape considering how long it had been buried. Another swish and the lid vanished, revealing the perfectly preserved body of Albus Dumbledore's younger sister.

With a maniacal grin on his heavily disguised face, Voldemort began the process of turning Arianna into an inferius. Once he was done, he

admired his handiwork momentarily before grabbing the animated corpse and apparating to Hogsmeade.

The unusual pair appeared with a pop in the alley behind the Three Broomsticks. Seeing no one around, he quietly opened the back door to the tavern and turned back to his newest minion and whispered, "Kill everyone in the pub!"

Once Arianna the Inferius was inside, he closed the door behind her and magically sealed the door. Moving to the front of the tavern, he began to magically seal the windows too. By the time he vanished from Hogsmeade in search of a new building to set up as his base of operations the screaming had already started from inside the Three Broomsticks.

## Chapter 39: With a new day dawns.

Rating: M...you have been warned! I don't own it and this is done for enjoyment, not profit.

Steam poured from the untouched mug of black tea on the corner of the paper strewn desk; its comforting warmth wasted as Cornelius Fudge continued to flip through the documents that Lucius had given him the other day. In the hustle and bustle of the completion of the TriWizard Tournament and the insane accusations that the Dark Lord had returned, he had simply forgotten about them until now.

Oh, how he had wished he had read this before the conclusion of that blasted tournament! The packet of information from Lucius had contained detailed notes about Sirius Black's escape, his unregistered animagus form, and Dumbledore's machinations for the past few years as a precursor to taking the post of Minister of Magic for himself!

Perspiration glistened on his upper lip as he continued to read through the details of Dumbledore's subtle changes to policies and laws that Cornelius had worked so hard to get passed into law. Changes that would bring about his downfall from the Ministers post unless he took swift action to counteract the political assassination attempt.

Fudge pushed himself away from his desk and poked his head out of his office and spoke condescendingly to his secretary, "Fetch Delores and a fresh tea set, then clear my morning schedule." Without waiting for a response, he closed his door with a snap and strode back to his desk and flopped down into his chair with a sigh.

~AQ~

While Fudge's morning was turning out to be an exercise in political maneuvering interspersed with moments of blind panic, Rita Skeeter was having quite the opposite start to a new day. She had received an invitation from Bathilda Bagshot to discuss some very delicate matters the day before and had eagerly replied that she would be at the revered historian's house first thing in the morning.

Her morning got even better when Bathilda dropped the proverbial bombshell that Albus Dumbledore had been Gellert Grindelwalds' gay lover. She confessed to Rita that she had been harboring that secret at Dumbledore's request because of her love for his deceased sister, Arianna, but that she could no longer keep her silence because of her guilty conscience at being related to Gellert and not doing anything to stop his descent into madness.

As Bathilda continued to regale her guest with indiscretions from Dumbledore's youth, Rita's quick quotes quill was going a kilometer a minute over pages and pages of parchment. When Ms. Bagshot began producing photos of the two infamous wizards together, along with private correspondence, Skeeter shuddered in orgasmic glee. Originally, she had thought to write a brief article for the Daily Prophet but with all of this information she was going to publish a book instead! A book that would earn her millions of galleons and forever engrave her name in the annals of reporters everywhere!

~AQ~

The mid morning sun streaming in through the window right into the closed eyes of Albus Dumbledore woke him from his pain induced slumber. Blinking owlishly, the headmaster slowly rolled to his side and sat up on the edge of his bed. gingerly, he stood up and began to shuffle towards the loo only to stop in mid stride with a surprised look on his face.

Tentatively, he bent double at the waist and attempted to touch his toes. The normal stiffness and pains associated with this movement were noticeably absent and when Albus stood up again, he had a huge smile on his face. He began moving his arms and legs in various directions and performing a multitude of different stretches before letting out a whoop of laughter. All of his normal aches and pains that had been catching up to him were gone! With a spring in his step and a tune on his lips, he walked briskly to the loo to get ready for the new day.

As he started to disrobe for his weekly bath, he looked down and let out a startled, "Ooh!" Slowly, as if it would disappear if he touched it,

he let his hand drift downwards to say hello to a long lost friend. "Oh, my!" he exclaimed as he began to reacquaint himself with, himself. Lost in his rediscovered youth, Dumbledore's ministrations became more frantic and with a last tug he howled out, "Gelle!" before painting the magical mirror with his pearly essence.

Unnoticed by Dumbledore, Fawkes sat rooted in his bird bath in the corner of the loo watching the entire spectacle with a look of horrified terror etched onto his avian face. Unable to cope with the images carved into his brain, Fawkes did something he hadn't done in more than a century; he had an unscheduled burning day.

~AQ~

Staring into a much cleaner mirror in a nicely appointed bathroom of a London Row house, Remus Lupin tentatively reached up and touched his teeth; his still elongated canine teeth. To make matters worse, his eyes also remained a brilliant shade of amber. "Oh bugger!" he mumbled as he began putting toothpaste on his toothbrush while staring at his own face.

While he brushed his teeth on autopilot, his formidable intellect was working overtime on the changes in his body. As he took a mental inventory, he noticed that his sense of smell, eyesight, and hearing were all sharper this morning. However, the biggest difference was that he could no longer feel the rage of the wolf inside of him howling to break free.

Startled by his discovery, Remus stopped brushing his teeth and focused his mind inward to where he knew the beast within him dwelled while toothpaste foam began to dribble down his chin and onto his hand. As his mind reached the area where the savage beast should be, he felt nothing; and yet everything, at the same time. A great sense of calm enveloped his curious mind and instinctively he knew what to do.

With a push from his magic, his bones began to shift and fur sprouted all over his quickly changing body. When the change was complete, Lupin stood stock still staring at himself in the bathroom mirror. His memories of the change while under the influence of the wolfsbane

potion allowed him to see the differences in his current form versus his prior feral one.

Where his feral werewolf form had been much lankier and smaller, his current body was larger and much more muscular. His facial features were more of a cross between a man and wolf than before and his fur had changed to a much darker brown, almost black, instead of the sandy brown it was before.

Willing his magic to revert him back to human, Remus noticed that the transformation, while uncomfortable, no longer hurt and was much faster now. With a grin that wouldn't look out of place on a Cheshire cat, he finished cleaning up in the bathroom and headed down to the kitchen for a spot of breakfast with a side of mischief.

~AQ~

Not really a morning person, Sirius Black stumbled and shuffled into the kitchen with his eyes barely open. He noticed a dark shape sitting at the breakfast table and muttered something that may or may not have been a greeting before continuing to pour himself a cup of coffee. Snagging a pastry that Dobby must have left on the counter, Sirius flopped ungracefully into the chair opposite Remus and began spooning copious amounts of sugar into his coffee.

Before he could ask, the cream was pushed across the table to him and he mindlessly picked it up and poured far too much into his cup of what could no longer be called coffee. After a few sips of his cup of 'coffee', Sirius was beginning to feel a bit more awake and alert. Realizing that Moony was far too quiet for being such a morning person, he looked up just as he was about to take a sip from his drink.

His brain froze as he tried to comprehend the massive werewolf sitting at the table across from him as if it was an everyday occurrence while reading the paper. "Was that the London Times?" Coffee began pouring onto the table from his tipped cup as Sirius continued to stare slack jawed in absolute terror.

Finally, his brain seemed to reengage and he let out an unmanly shriek of fear while frantically backing away from the table. In his haste

to escape, Sirius got tangled up in the legs of the chair and toppled over backwards. Panicked, he shot to his feet just as Dora burst into the room with her wand drawn followed closely by John and Annabelle.

Looking around the room for any sign of danger, and finding none, Dora blurted out in confusion, "What's going on in here?"

Sitting at the table munching on a scone and sipping his tea, Remus answered calmly, "I've got no idea. Sirius just started screaming blue murder while he was drinking his cup of Jane."

Indignant, Sirius shouted, "Cup of...Wait a minute!" and jabbed an accusing finger at the still seated Remus before continuing, "There was a great big bloody werewolf sitting at the table just a minute ago!"

"Cor, blimey! It's weeks to the full moon you dolt! And it's morning, not nighttime!" Dora huffed in annoyance as her eyes narrowed slightly as she took a closer look at the perfectly composed Remus. With a flick of her wrist, the table was clean and the mug repaired, before she flopped into the recently vacated chair while John and Annabelle sat down much more gracefully.

Remus let out a chuckle and said softly, "Well, you two are definitely related by the way you abuse the chairs around here." Looking back up at Sirius, he asked innocently, "Too much sauce last night, Padfoot?"

Sirius was now standing with his back against the far counter, his heart still hammering against his ribcage, as he tried to figure out what had just happened. "Wait; what?" he replied before blurting, "I didn't drink that much last night!" before continuing indignantly, "What the hell is going on?"

Gazing intently at Lupin, Annabelle said, "You look different this morning, Remus."

Turning to look at her fully for the first time, he held her gaze and gave a rueful smile but said nothing.

Being male, and usually clueless about such things, both Sirius and John didn't notice the difference in their friend but Dora and Annabelle blurted out simultaneously, "Your eyes! Your teeth! What happened?"

His ghost of a smile got a little bigger and he said simply, "I'm not sure, but I don't think I'm going to change at the next full moon unless I really want to."

Shocked by his friend's statement, Sirius came back over to the table to get a closer look at the changes in his friend. Stumped, he simply said, "That doesn't make sense."

Shrugging, Remus pushed back from the table slightly and said, "I don't understand it either, but I'm not going to look a gift horse in the mouth."

Curious, and being a big science fiction geek, John asked eagerly, "Well, can you show us?"

Remus' silent reply was the arching of one eyebrow before he quickly began morphing right before their eyes.

As the fur began sprouting on Remus, Sirius and Dora backed up quickly and drew their wands with identical looks of dread. The change took seconds and when it was complete, Remus was gone and sitting in his chair was a beast that looked well over two hundred kilos and somewhere around two and a half meters tall covered in dark fur and muscle.

Careful not to startle anyone, the werewolf calmly reached forward and picked up the last bite of the scone and popped it into its mouth and began to chew.

Too shocked for words, Dora went to sit back down and completely missed her chair while Sirius stuttered softly, "But, but, that's impossible!"

Annabelle reached a hand halfway across the table and asked softly, "May I see your hand?"

With a nod of acceptance, Remus placed his massive paw on the table palm up and watched with interest as Annabelle began moving his fingers and slowly turning his hand over to inspect the back while she mumbled, "Amazing!"

Gathering her wits about her, Dora climbed into her chair and took a long look at Remus in his new werewolf form and mentally cataloging the differences between the old one and the new. After a few seconds of hesitation, she grabbed his other hand and began a very similar inspection to Annabelle's. Finished with her inspection, she looked into his eyes and asked softly, "Change back please?"

His body rippled momentarily before he reverted to his natural form leaving four stunned individuals sitting or standing in the kitchen staring in wonder at him. Blushing slightly, Remus said, "Any more tricks you lot want me to perform or can I finish my breakfast now?"

~AQ~

Draco was standing at the small corner sink wearing just his shirt as he tried to do something that was beneath his station, clean his own clothes. He was so engrossed that he didn't hear the door to his cell open over his mutterings about having to clean like a common muggle.

The sound of the lock snapping shut brought him out of his funk and he spun around holding his now dripping clothes in front of his naked lower body only to come face to face with what he was sure was part troll.

Before Draco could speak, the giant of a man rumbled, "'Ello boysie. Aren't you a pret'e one?" while stepping forward and pulling the wet clothes away and tossing them into the corner of the cell. Leering at Draco's attempts to cover himself, the drunk man slurred, "'Ere I was lookin' for a bit o' spare when those bleedin' aurors showed up and tossed me in 'ere."

Ignoring Draco's increasing struggles, the large man bodily tossed the blonde boy onto the lower bunk and began removing his robes. Once he was naked, he climbed on top of the petrified boy and slurred joyfully, "No sense passin' up a perfectly good trip down bournville boulevard."

Seeing the abject look of terror in the boys' eyes, he smiled his gapped-tooth smile and said huskily, "Don' you worry your pret'e lil 'ead, ole Nigel's gonna give you a right good rogering!"

More than one auror on duty could have sworn there was a pig in the cell block due to all the squealing that morning.

~AQ~

Alecto Carrow was officially bored out of her mind. Lucius and Amycus had both left about thirty minutes before to make their report to the Dark Lord, leaving her to mind the shop while they were away.

Too much tea and not enough activity left her antsy and her bladder full. Unable to stand the pressure anymore, she deserted her post behind the counter and dashed for the loo to relieve the pressure in her bladder. She reached the loo and began pulling up her robes only to begin cursing up a storm, "Oh, bugger it all to hell!" Grumbling, she began trying to unbutton her trousers while muttering, "How the hell do those stupid blokes stand this?" Giving it up as a bad job, she violently yanked her pants down and sat on the toilet like a woman instead of standing like the polyjuiced man she was impersonating.

Alecto was so absorbed in her mini drama that she failed to hear the chime above the door sound or the sudden absence of sound beyond the partially open door to the loo.

~AQ~

Ted Tonks was crouched under a disillusionment charm in a, filthy, urine soaked, alley across the street from the wand maker's shop in Knockturn Alley taking his turn staking out the premises while they came up with a plan to take out everyone in the shop quietly. Luck shined on him when he saw two of the three people he was sure

were Death Eaters inside the building apparate away after a brief discussion.

Realizing that he wasn't going to get a better chance, he darted across the street and after checking that it was empty, he slipped into the shop and cast a silencing ward and another quick spell to locate the third person. His last spell alerted him that his quarry was somewhere in the back at the end of a very narrow hallway.

Standing partially in the hall with his wand drawn and pointed at the door, Ted waited a few seconds as he listened for any sounds before he began to creep forward. He heard the distinct sigh and the tinkle of someone using the toilet and quickly closed the distance to the slightly open door.

~AQ~

Letting out a sigh of relief and pleasure, Alecto leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees while she waited for her bladder to empty. "What the hell?" she mumbled when she discovered that she couldn't hear anything from the front of the shop; not even the usual noises from the street. Realizing that something was wrong, she began to fumble with her clothes to reach the wand that was now trapped in the bundle at her ankles.

~AQ~

Ted heard the muttered curse from the loo and a sudden rustling of clothes. Not wanting to lose his advantage, he swiftly approached the partially open door and kicked it as hard as he could while keeping his wand pointed into the room.

The door blew inward with tremendous force and hit the man on the toilet right in the head causing him to drop his wand into the bowl and crash backwards into the tank of the toilet.

Time seemed to freeze momentarily as they stared into each other's eyes before the man on the toilet drove his hand into the bowl to reach for his wand. Before his wand could clear the toilet seat, the

bright red flash of a reducto spell left Ted's wand and hit the man right between the eyes.

The spray of blood, bone, and brain matter was spectacular. Ted was covered in gore almost as badly as the floor, walls, and ceiling of the small loo. Wiping something disgusting from his eyes, Ted slowly reached down and lifted the right sleeve of the man's shirt to find what he was expecting, the Dark Mark of Voldemort.

Realizing that he needed to get out of their quickly, Ted moved back into the main part of the shop and reapplied the disillusionment charm before slipping out the door and apparating back to Grimmauld Place.

~AQ~

Lucius and Amycus were finishing up their report to the Dark Lord over a marvelous breakfast courtesy of the remaining Malfoy House Elves.

Voldemort wiped his pale lips on the starched, embossed, white linen napkin before folding it in half and setting it down on his plate. The silence hung heavy in the air as the Dark Lord peered over his now steepled fingers at his two increasingly nervous minions. Leaning forward slightly, he tapped his index fingers together rhythmically for a few seconds before hissing menacingly, "Let me summarize. You left Alecto," his gaze locked onto Amycus and he continued with a sneer, "your precious sister, all alone in a wand shop to set an ambush for the aurors or some of Dumbledore's people."

Inwardly, Lucuis cringed at the all too pleasant tone coming from his Lord. It was a tone he knew well and it promised pain if Voldemort wasn't happy with the answers he was about to receive.

Stupidly, Alecto didn't notice the danger signs and said simply, "Yes, Milord. She will be more than capable of handling things while we are away."

"I see." Voldemort said pleasantly as he leaned back in his chair and slowly pushed it back from the table a few inches before continuing in a conversational tone, "And how well do you think she will withstand

an assault if she is ambushed or simply overwhelmed by superior numbers?"

Alarm bells were ringing in Lucius' head as he listened to the Dark Lord while trying to discretely move his chair further away from Alecto. A brief glare from the Dark Lord halted his movement and served to increase his nervousness.

Alecto sat there like a fish out of water, his mouth opening and closing but no sound coming out, as he processed the words of his master. Panicked, he blurted, "Milord! May I go back to the shop to ensure that she is unharmed?"

Voldemort made a dismissive gesture with his hand while saying, "Go and check on your sister. I will send Lucius along after we finish our discussion."

Alecto practically ran from the room in his haste to check on his sister. Once he was gone, Voldemort turned to Lucius and hissed menacingly, "I'm sure Amycus is already dead. Her death can be used to our advantage though." Leaning forward in his chair slightly, he leaned his forearms on the table and practically growled, "I want you to stoke Alecto's grief and rage and then point him at Amelia Bones. She has become a problem that we need to deal with."

Sensing a clear dismissal, Lucius got up slowly from the table and after a quick nod to his lord, he headed for the exit to begin his new task, thankful that he had escaped his master's wrath. Just as he reached the dining room door, Voldemort casually threatened, "Do not make another monumental blunder in judgment again. We can salvage this situation because we got lucky."

~AQ~

Aberforth Dumbledore was on his way over to the Three Broomsticks for his weekly breakfast with Rosmerta when he noticed that the door was locked and there was a faint odor of burnt meat in the air. Worried, he drew his wand and unlocked the door. He had barely crossed the threshold when the smell of death hit him full in

the face. Bodies were strewn throughout the demolished interior of Hogsmeade's most popular establishment.

Very carefully, he moved into the room to check for any survivors. As he neared the bar, he heard a wet ripping noise followed by the unmistakable sounds of chewing. Fearing the worst, Aberforth held his wand at the ready as he stepped around the edge of the smoldering wreckage of the bar, only to come face to face with an inferius instead of the vampire he was expecting.

A moan of despair escaped his lips when he realized that the animated corpse had been feasting upon the remains of his on again off again girlfriend, Rosmerta. The beast turned at the sound of Aberforth's grief and stared momentarily before charging with alarming speed for a corpse.

Instantly, a bright orange flame erupted from the tip of his wand and engulfed the oncoming inferius in its fiery embrace. Tears poured down his face as he watched the body of his sister die for a second time. Once the body was reduced to ashes, he sank to his knees and howled in anguish as the pain from his sister's death hit him all over again.

~AQ~

Hannah Abbot was the summer holiday maid for Tom at the Leaky Cauldron and it was her first morning on the job. She had already cleaned two of the rooms on the third floor of the inn and was making her way towards the last room on that floor. Pushing her cart down the hall, she hoped that this guest had at least left a tip for her, unlike the guests from the other two rooms. "Cheap bastards." She mumbled while knocking on the door. When she didn't receive an answer after a few seconds, she pulled out her ring of keys and called out, "Maid service!" and unlocked the door.

With practiced ease, she bumped the door open with her hip while backing into the room dragging her cleaning cart. Once she had the cart in the room, she called out again, "Maid service!" and turned towards the bed, only to come face to face with two naked men.

It took her brain a moment to catch up with what her eyes were seeing before she screamed.

When Gregory Goyle, Sr. heard the scream, he shifted his body slightly to get a better look before returning to his task at hand. His movement exposed the lifeless eyes of Severus Snape and when Hannah's gaze locked on her former professors, she began screaming in earnest. The rhythmic slapping of Goyle's thighs against Snape's buttocks could be heard clearly every time Hannah paused to take a breath before screaming some more.

Tom, the innkeeper, burst into the room with his wand drawn and a curse on his lips, ready to protect his niece at all costs. The curse died on his tongue when he took in the macabre scene in front of him. He had seen a lot of strange things in his forty plus years of running the Leaky Cauldron but this was a first. Composing himself, he silently stunned the larger man and watched in morbid fascination as he slumped onto the back of the obviously deceased Severus Snape.

Not wanting to contaminate the crime scene, Tom gently guided Hannah out of the room before closing and locking the door behind him. She was hyperventilating but otherwise looked to be unharmed so he gently sat her down on the steps before sending a messenger spell to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

Unsure of what to say, he silently wrapped his arm around his niece's shoulder and rocked her while they waited for the aurors to arrive.

Chp40